

Pervasive Precarity:  
Migrant Mexican Oil Workers' Experiences and Tactics to Navigate Uncertainty

By

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## **Abstract**

An ethnographic analysis of precarity as experienced by migrant Mexican oil workers in permanently insecure work structures in the Gulf of Mexico, this study explores precarious employment situations in the oil industry and tactics workers use to navigate, cope with, and diminish uncertainty. In addition to workers' experiences, I analyze the contexts in which individuals live and work, including: labor-market changes; the history, politics, and geography of oil; and hurricanes' impacts on labor. To better understand the tightrope walk between precarious employment and unemployment, I conducted interviews with workers and others affiliated with the oil industry during fieldwork in the Coastal Bend of Texas, in 2008, and Ciudad del Carmen, Mexico, in 2012. Both areas are important in the Gulf of Mexico oil industry and draw workers for projects both in the fabrication of offshore vessels and drilling and production of offshore oil. I interviewed industry officials, community members, and others in Texas and Campeche, focusing on work experiences in the oil industry.

As in many industries, the oil industry has transitioned to rely on a nonpermanent, contract-based workforce, a move to casualized labor. Consequently, individuals become serial contract workers. Experiences of forced idleness, corruption, and non-material precarity characterize their lives. The labor demand for repair and construction in the oil industry following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita was significant, prompting the importation of guestworkers on the H-2B visa, a problematic program. To cope within precarious work structures, workers develop tactics, including work in the informal economy or without pay and the utilization of a variety of illicit improvisations. They also use their mobility, weak social ties, and so-called traditional

livelihoods as tactics. The exploration of workers' situated responses to a multiplicity of uncertainties allows a fuller understanding of local-level effects of global change.



*To my grandparents,  
who know what work is,  
whose roots have always been tenacious and deep,  
who taught me that our horizons, like those of our prairie home,  
are expansive, ever changing, and dotted with people from whom we are privileged to learn.*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

*Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free...The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident. In this sense oil is a fairy tale and, like every fairy tale, a bit of a lie.*

Ryszard Kapusceinski, *Shah of Shahs*

I set out in January 2008, at the beginning of a volatile year for crude oil and gasoline prices, for South Texas to do the fieldwork that forms the basis of this study. Media and dinner table conversations around the United States at this time tuned to the rising cost of work commutes, road and air travel, and transported foods. But I found myself for the first time confronted with the *face* of our dependence on fossil fuels—the welders, pipefitters, roustabouts, operators, and engineers working onshore and off, on drilling and production platforms, and in shipyards building and repairing the massive structures that dot the Gulf of Mexico. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita were indelibly etched in the memories of those working in the petroleum and ancillary industries in Texas. Even several years afterward, those extreme weather events informed everyday decisions and experiences. This was a boom time—fabrication yards continuously advertised for class-1 welders, pipefitters, and helpers; the experienced workers—citizens and immigrants legally authorized to work in the US, or not—frequently could take their pick of offshore positions, or stay on land and work dozens of overtime hours repairing, retrofitting, and building new platforms. But the boom was not to last long.

My fieldwork took place in 2008 and 2012, spanning a precariousness time for workers in the Gulf of Mexico oil industry. The Great Recession began in 2008, the same year the US Congress rejected extending the returning worker program that temporarily lifted the cap of 66,000 H-2B

visas allotted per year. The Macondo Blowout (as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of April 20, 2010, is referred to by many in the petroleum industry) had politicians, industry officials, workers, and community members on edge. As did rising drug-related violence in Mexico and at the border; the spiraling of organized violence; the realization that the US and Mexico were losing the “war on drugs”; the memory of Katrina. These events affected the experiences of the people and industry I studied and shaped the circumstances of my research and fieldwork.

### Alonso’s Story

I met Alonso, a pipe welder from Veracruz, Mexico, during my first few weeks in Ingleside, Texas. More than a mere study participant, he became a friend and sounding board, a true key informant. Over conversations in his newly painted 2003 forest green Nissan SUV as we crossed the Corpus Christi Bay causeway, eating and drinking at his co-workers’ extended-stay hotel rooms and any number of *taquerías*, and then later over text messages, phone calls, and Internet chats, he taught me about welding, working offshore, navigating the US guestworker system, and weathering the wait for a visa or a job. Amidst financial downturns and recessions, an unprecedented oil spill, and other natural resource disasters and guestworker legislation changes, I was able to experience the booms, busts, and inherent uncertainties of the petroleum industry through Alonso’s commentary and perspective. As I learned more about Alonso, I saw how his background and past experiences shaped how he interpreted what happened to him, the context of his geographic and historical situation, and how he made decisions and acted.

Nine years earlier, Alonso found out he was going to become a father at age 17. He moved from his home and family in Veracruz to Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche, where he heard there was good paying work. He learned his trade, welding, at a job he just “happened upon,” from an



older worker who took him under his wing. A quick learner and a steady hand—something important for a welder—Alonso developed his skills working in Ciudad del Carmen several times a year. He was later contracted by a US company on an H-2B visa, a nonagricultural temporary work visa.

He first worked in the US Gulf of Mexico coast in 2006, after the exodus of workers and increased pipeline, platform, and other infrastructure repairs left a work-force vacuum following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.<sup>1</sup> Until 2008, when I met him, Alonso could obtain a new visa as a returnee quite easily each year. Despite long work weeks and frequently dangerous jobs, he made relatively good money. In 2006, he brought in just under \$100,000, and he “would never work for less than \$25 per hour,” he confided. But Alonso did not know that extremely high crude oil prices may bespeak an economic crisis, and, in 2009, the global recession cut short the industry’s need to import his skills. Changes in the nonagricultural visa legislation made it more difficult for companies to vie for the now-limited number of visas available. Accustomed to a good wage in the US, at first he was reluctant to work in Mexico for lower pay. The self-confident, almost haughty, young man I met when he was working 80-hour weeks and earning *dólares* (dollars) became angry when he wasn’t able to find a job, then diffident when he finally resigned himself to working for less than he felt he deserved. Yet with family responsibilities mounting—a daughter entering primary school, an ailing father and grandmother, and growing family debts—he needed money. He yielded and found short-term contract jobs, usually with his brothers in his hometown of Xalapa, Veracruz—a Mexican city once revered for its art, culture, and natural beauty—now a hotbed for narcoviolence.

Since he first worked away from home at the age of 17 in 1998, Alonso has had more than his fair share of jackpots and misfortunes. He earned nearly \$100,000 in 2006, but during the fall of 2009 he lost over \$2,000 to a labor contractor who promptly disappeared. He survived a tragic fall at a worksite in Veracruz in 2010, but his extensive rehabilitation was not covered by worker's compensation or insurance, and he will never regain full use of his right hand. Finally, after two years of waiting for and pursuing several visa opportunities to work in the US, each time seemingly more certain than the time before, it appeared that fate favored him again. Alonso heard about a company looking to hire H-2B welders from a *tampiqueño* (a person from Tampico, Tamaulipas, Mexico) he met in Texas who worked for a Louisiana-based company in West Africa. Wearing a lucky amulet filled with an oil prepared by a *bruja* (witch), in June 2011 Alonso returned to Ingleside, Texas, hoping to compensate for several years of under- and unemployment and what he deemed "bad luck."

This time in Texas, he found the general atmosphere more restricting and less amenable to guestworkers trying to get ahead. Alonso didn't earn the money he was promised when he signed his contract. He also believes he was overcharged for housing and transportation. This time he didn't bring a car, which he had sold to cover bills in Mexico. He was not able to get a driver's license or renew his Texas license, which had expired while he was in Mexico. Alonso lived in company housing rather than on his own with friends, as he had before. Paying someone to drive him to and from Walmart or across the Bay to Corpus Christi, he felt "nickel and dimed," and obligated to attend church with his driver.

His social network did expand, and he learned of a company contracting skilled welders for the tar sands of Alberta, Canada. He began the process of paperwork and waiting when he

returned to Mexico after completing of his contract in the spring of 2012. Months of waiting were defined by frustration: attempting to reclaim loans made to friends when he was working, borrowing from family and friends for daily expenses. Unemployment and odd jobs were punctuated by short-term contract welding work. For example, he was contracted for a project with a Spanish recreational boatbuilding company in Cancun. Even after over a year of waiting, he still holds hope for this Canadian visa—as it offers a path to residency, unlike US guestworker visas.

Alonso's experiences exemplify the precarious situations of migrant Mexican oil workers, the varied manifestations of uncertainty in which they live and work, and the tactics they use to manage and minimize uncertainty. Alonso's story displays how an individual experiences global change as rhizomatic uncertainty. Each geopolitical insecurity is connected to and may exacerbate others—from mercurial governments to the narcotics trade and its associated organized violence to the impotence of a nationalized oil company facing production and reserves decline and looming voracious transnational corporations. Add to geopolitics the endemic uncertainty of the petroleum industry, the fragmentation of family and other networks, and the uncertainty of climate variability, extreme weather events, and disasters, and we begin to see the complexity of his situation.

### Research Focus

This is an analysis of the role of uncertainty in migrant Mexican oil workers' everyday lives and the tactics they employ to navigate precarious livelihoods. To more fully understand how individuals who gain their livelihoods from precarious employment are entangled in oil geopolitics, labor market changes, and climate variability, I explore: 1) precarious employment

situations in the oil industry and 2) tactics workers use to navigate and diminish uncertainty. This is primarily an ethnography of migrant workers, and, therefore, I draw heavily upon literatures on the anthropology of work, precarious work, and migration. This research is informed by a wide variety of literatures, including on 1) globalization, transnational migration, and guestworkers; 2) oil and natural resources, the petroleum industry and energy policy; and 3) uncertainty, especially in the realm of work. I consider a comprehensive typology of drivers and perceptions of uncertainty. To that end, this study also examines climate variability and extreme weather events, focusing on hurricanes and their effects on the petroleum industry in the Gulf of Mexico. I discuss in greater detail the theoretical underpinnings of these literatures and perspectives as related to my ethnographic research in the following chapters.

### **Uncertainty and Precarity**

Social science's approach to uncertainty is paramount to my perspective in this research. As opposed to risk, which involves calculation of the probability of an undesirable outcome, uncertainty refers to situations in which calculation is impossible: "An actor lacks explanation of the forces that determine his or her destiny" (Hyden 2000:29). A product of both ignorance and impotence, uncertainty, according to Bauman (2011b:95), "defies our capacity to comprehend the situation, act with self-confidence and reach the purposes we set." Some scholars (see Appadurai 1998; Bauman 2007a; Berner and Trulsson 2000b) have highlighted the increasing pervasiveness of uncertainty in contemporary society, suggesting that social uncertainties affect how people perceive and cope with their everyday lives (Berner and Trulsson 2000b:4). Touching many aspects of life, particularly making decisions whose consequences are not easily anticipated, the effects of uncertainty can have extreme consequences for individuals, families,

and communities (Tannert et al. 2007:892). Uncertainty today is characterized by “short-term planning, instant gratification, the weakening of institutions, ephemeral relationships, struggles to manage risk, volatile consumerist identities and the collapse of viable communities” (Jay 2010:97). Scholars at times refer to this contemporary manifestation of pervasive uncertainty as “precarity,” a neologism from the French word *précarité*, literally meaning precariousness, but denoting lack of predictability and security and the consequential social and psychological effects of this state of being.

Precarity fits within the larger discussion of new social realities—framed as postmodernity, liquid modernity, the consumer society, or any number of phrases scholars have used to designate this particular time in history. Bauman (2007) delineates five characteristics of what he prefers to call liquid modernity: 1) impermanence of social forms; 2) separation of power from politics; 3) discontinuity of interhuman bonds; 4) fragmentation of history and lives; and 5) shift of responsibility to individuals. Evaluating, planning, and acting under conditions of endemic uncertainty has become a key challenge of negotiating one’s livelihood today.

Globalization, how we understand the diminishing of time and space and the increasing mobility of capital and people, is a key driver of precarity. Global processes of change have increasingly become the source of a gamut of uncertainties, which in turn have a profound impact in everyday local life (Berner and Trulsson 2000a:6). Neoliberal reforms, attempting to diminish the role of the state through various economic measures, have created governments that are disinclined or unable to handle the uncertainties arising from global change and external creditor demands (ibid.). The burden is now on the individual, according to Bauman (2011b:101), “to find individual answers to socially created problems, act upon them using their

individually managed resources, and bear responsibility for their choices and the success or defeat of their action.”

Tactics used to succeed or “get by” in the past may no longer be viable. Being “thrown into the unknown” (Hyden 2000:267), people now find themselves in situations where “there is no memory that can help them grasp what is happening to them, and where they have to reinvent the basic parameters that can help them to rebuild systems of intelligibility of who they are, where they come from, and what they want to be” (ibid.). In fact, rather than starting from the premise of calculating the probability of future success based on past successes, “a swift and thorough forgetting” of obsolete information and practices may be a more important starting point. Learning may be less important than improvisation.

Berner (2000) accordingly presents two types of strategies: deliberate and emergent. Deliberate actions are consciously entered into, long-term, and comprehensive. Emergent strategies on the other hand are improvised, reactive, and do not result from formal planning. She portrays emergent strategies as “muddling through,” as a form of situational action, and a “step-wise process, where learning at each stage informs action for the next step, but where there is no calculated long-term plan or ‘deliberate strategy’” (ibid.:283). When everyday life is something that cannot be fully planned and requires exposure and entanglement with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, the individual must learn to tinker with the system to survive.

Uncertainty is exhibited starkly in the realm of work, which has been radically transformed by social, political, and economic forces (Kalleberg 2011:1). As a core activity in society, work is key to identity, something that connects individuals and positions them within the larger society. Kalleberg (2009:1) believes the study of work reveals changes in the social order and

problems people and governments must address. With the death of the “job as we know it” and “flexibility” as work’s motto (Gane 2001:270), we are now subject to greater work insecurity and the overwhelming presence of precarity.

### **Precarious work**

Work that is uncertain, unpredictable, and generally dependent on external forces is considered contingent. Such work has become widespread. Contingent workers are unable to plan their own time and are essentially “on call” or subject to “just-in-time” hiring practices. Scholars and governmental agencies use a variety of terms for this type of work (Vosko et al. 2003): contingent work, alternative work arrangements, nontraditional employment relations, flexible staffing arrangements, atypical employment, peripheral employment, and precarious employment (Kalleberg 2000).<sup>2</sup> According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005:2), contingent workers are “those who do not have an implicit or explicit contract for ongoing employment.” The International Labour Organisation’s broad definition of precarious work includes all work characterized by a “range of factors that contribute to whether a particular form of employment exposes the worker to employment instability, a lack of legal and union protection, and social and economic vulnerability” (Rodgers and Janine 1989:1).

I also adopt a broad definition of precarious work, choosing to use *precarious* rather than *contingent*, as I believe the effects and impacts of these labor constellations originate from a variety of circumstances, of which contingency is only one. Precarious employment can be categorized by four elements: 1) degree of continuing employment or “time horizons”; 2) control over the labor process; 3) degree of regulatory protection--through union representation or law; and 4) income (Rodgers and Janine 1989; Vosko et al. 2003). An individual’s employment may

be precarious if any of the aforementioned elements is affected. One may choose to overlook one negative aspect of a job to attain other certain goals: for example, forego a position with retirement potential in exchange for one that offers exceptional short-term pay.

A precarious worker is, by definition, a flexible worker: “available when required, undemanding when not” (Anderson 2010:300). Companies hire individuals for short-term work to deal with seasonal, emergency, or market-created, high-demand periods. Flexible workers diminish employers’ labor costs but may of their own accord choose this type of employment. Individuals may choose these work arrangements, despite the inherent instability—the flip side of flexibility—to pursue other life goals, education, hobbies, or family responsibilities. Grave problems arise when flexible work arrangements and precarious employment are the only option to unemployment (Bayón 2006:145).

Precarious employment is not new: “If we look at capitalism in a wider historical and geographical scope, it is precarity that is the norm and not Fordist economic organization” (Neilson and Rossiter 2008:54). In fact, one of the most interesting ways for anthropology to problematize issues of precarious work is to identify how work differs between countries (Kalleberg 2009) and how human and capital mobility further complicate the issue. This study of a border-spanning industry and its border-crossing workers is an effort to give a local view of precarious work while stepping back to expose and unravel larger issues.



The effects of precarious work are multiple and are manifested not only at the workplace but also socially. In an organizational management study, Feldman (2006) finds that precarity affects job attitudes and perceptions, turnover, on-the-job behavior, and productivity. The wide-reaching effect of “multiple forms of uncertainty affects the way people do their jobs, the decisions they make, the direction and extent of their aspirations, and their willingness to comply with or consent to changes in workplaces and in the employment contract” (Smith 2001:169).

Work is intimately related to other social, economic, and political issues (Kalleberg 2009:8), and precarity carries into other aspects of life (Elcioglu 2010:118). With increasing work instability, life-stories are breaking into fragments (Smith 2001). A worker’s expectation of a temporary contract can result in hesitation to form social attachments. Households, rather than being cohesive social units defined by long-held cultural patterns, may become temporary accommodations for highly flexible, mobile workers (Anderson 2010:305).

Despite powerful external forces shaping the experiences of workers, they are not passive victims of unseen influences and are, in fact, functioning decision makers and actors in their own lives (Hodson 2001:50). It is yet to be determined to what extent individuals can shape their careers, taking into account their needs and preferences, all the while responding to “the realities of uncertainty and risk that are endemic to the new economy” (Marler et al. 2002:449). Yet endemic uncertainty and precarious work make predicting the future with any degree of probability nearly impossible. Bourdieu (1998:83) says that workers have suffered a blow to their capacity to project themselves into the future, which is the precondition for all so-called rational conduct, starting with economic calculation, or, in a quite different realm, political organization. Those workers, who are willing to be innovative and intrepid, improvising

strategies across space and time, using social networks and other means, may risk being the most exploited but also may be the most successful. Sacrificing finances and the comfort of “home,” individuals who migrate for work are just such workers.

### **Globalization and Transnational Migration**

Migrant workers, such as those in guestworker programs, are increasingly subjects of debates about precarious work (Anderson 2010:303). Flexibility in general is deemed desirable in the current global economy. Flexibility of location, however, is contentious: mobility across national borders is controlled. Beck (2000:30) reinforces this, saying, “people who do what is so much demanded within individual countries find themselves criminalized” when they mobilize across borders (ibid.). Migrant workers, particularly unauthorized workers, are the ideal precarious workers: undemanding, flexible, tractable, and they “view work instrumentally” (Anderson 2010:304). They work in more and more markets where they are valued for often working for lower pay and minimal benefits and ignorance of—or the willingness to turn a blind-eye to—regulations, such as safety requirements.

While mobility may ensure migrant workers’ income, remittances, and “transnational options” (Ross 2008:37), it is highly controlled by what Anderson (2010) calls the “institutionalization of uncertainty.” By restricting migrants’ access to labor markets, the state controls not only entry but also the context of migrants’ stay. For example, under most migrant worker schemes, the power of fixed-term contracts is held by the contracting company, which can terminate contracts at any point. Migrant workers are rarely empowered to contest employers’ actions. According to Anderson, “immigration controls work with and against migratory processes to produce workers with particular types of relations to employers and to

labour markets” (ibid.:306). Migration continues, however, to be a feasible option for individuals navigating uncertainty, especially in situations of growing inequality in places of origin (Portes and Hoffman 2003:41).

Transnational migration is tangled up in global capitalism. The international movement of labor does not make sense outside of the global scene, where capital and goods flow relatively and increasingly freely (Basch et al. 1994:22). The global economy has prompted the emergence of new transnational spaces that in previous eras were either not necessary or unavailable to migrants. “Given the current conjuncture of global capitalism, newly created transnational spaces are sites at which new and multiple identities are fashioned and a variety of old and new forms of power and domination are exercised” (Blanc et al. 2007:684).

Before the advent of modern telecommunications and jet airplanes, communication and travel between migrants’ different “homes” was expensive, time consuming, and arduous. Immigrant civic organization leaders could not easily travel to their community of origin to check on how migrant-funded projects were being handled. Today, in the span of just a weekend, a Mexican worker can fly directly from any number of cities in the United States to several Mexican cities, conduct business and visit family, compile and complete paperwork via fax or email, and keep in contact with family and friends via text messages, Internet chat, or even Internet video calls. Daily contact would have been nearly impossible a hundred years ago, and, even a few years ago, there were few cost-effective options for communication to more remote parts of the world. Today, it is not merely the foreign dignitary or business person who can have instant access to partners abroad; a *veracruzano* welder working in coastal Texas or offshore Louisiana can text message or chat via the Internet with family and friends in his home village.

Fax machines, the Internet, telephones, and airplanes compress space and time, and the rate and extent of transnational activities are directly related to the access an individual has to these technologies.

*Labor Visas and the H-Class Visa.* Migration is just one of many strategy options workers may use to manage uncertainty. It is often required in the petroleum industry: oil extraction is necessarily located where the oil is, and labor must move to it. Migrant workers transform the areas they move to, even as they to adjust to their new residences and workplaces. Few workers permanently relocate to oil enclaves, choosing instead to follow the job.

In situations of labor demand, companies may search out ways to attract—or import—labor. Currently, the US has a guestworker scheme, the H-class visa. David Griffith is one of the few anthropologists who has published on nonagricultural guestworkers in the US. He notes (2006:159) that one of the most interesting aspects of H-class visas is that “they are issued to people to perform tasks at the extremes of the labor market—both individuals of exceptional talent or skill (famous rock stars, heart surgeons, computer programmers) and workers who perform menial tasks.” The H-2B visa allows temporary nonagricultural employment for foreign workers. Employers must prove there are no United States citizens or residents available to do the job, and the position must be for one year or less. The need, moreover, “must be a one-time occurrence, or a seasonal, peak load or intermittent need, not an ongoing need. Consequently, few people enter the United States in H-2B status each year” (ibid.:89), and entrants are capped at 66,000 per annum.

**Table 1: Types of H-Class Visas**

<b>Visa Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>H-1A</b>	Work in a specialty occupation that requires a higher education degree or its equivalent. Also includes fashion models and government-to-government research and development.
<b>H-2A</b>	For temporary or seasonal agricultural work. Limited to citizens or nationals of designated countries.
<b>H-2B</b>	For temporary or seasonal nonagricultural work. Limited to citizens or nationals of designated countries.

Source: United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

Some scholars have argued that fear of crossing the border illegally, living in hiding, and the added stability and predictability of H-2 visa work convinces some individuals to choose to go through a recruiter to gain H-2 employment. Griffith says H-2 workers appreciate the security the visa provides. “Under H-2 contracts workers at least know where they will be working, what they will be doing, and approximately how much money they will make” (2006:163). The work is also generally stable and the journey to the job site is less harrowing than other options, such as crossing the border with a *coyote*.

However, this is not always the case. Some labor contractors or middlemen recruit workers for positions that do not exist, forcing workers to spend their savings on room and board in the US. Other workers are promised inflated wages they never receive. H-2B visa workers’ political status as temporary guest workers creates a new type of “unfree” labor force, prompting the Southern Poverty Law Center (Bauer 2008) to call the H-2B visa “close to slavery.” Bound to one employer, unable to freely participate in the labor market, and vulnerable to coercion due to threat of expulsion and sanctions (Smith-Nonini 2003), these workers are victims of their position’s contingency. But they may also take advantage of it.

## **Oil and Natural Resources**

As the United States' dependence on fossil fuels continues and the baby-boom generation reaches retirement age, boom times create shortages of skilled craft labor in vocations such as welding and pipefitting. The age of the average oil industry craft laborer increases by the year, and few members of younger generations are prepared to fill the gap baby boomers leave at retirement. Throughout the Gulf, fabrication and shipbuilding<sup>3</sup> yards have contracted H-2B workers to fill the growing need in the skilled craft trades. Mexican migrants, many hailing from Mexican states on the Gulf, have entered the workforce in the fabrication, maintenance, and repair of oil platforms and rigs destined for all parts of the world.

Although primarily from Mexico, H-2B workers in the petroleum and related industries in the Gulf of Mexico during my fieldwork came from various countries, including the Philippines, Vietnam, India, and Romania. The age of H-2B workers varies, from men in their early twenties to their mid-fifties. Most H-2B workers had home-country experience in the shipbuilding and fabrication industry or in the related oil and gas industry, both on and offshore.

Not all oil workers are migrants, nor are all Mexican oil workers precarious workers. A great number of contingent workers in the US—who may make their homes or temporarily work in such Gulf oil enclaves as Houston, Texas, or Houma, Louisiana—are US citizens or residents. Likewise, Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex) has a large number of workers in its union. These are not precarious workers in any sense—many make their livelihood and raise their families comfortably with the lifelong security that Pemex will take care of them. The effects of precarity are felt most directly by the most tractable portion of a workforce; in this case, workers on

temporary contracts throughout the Gulf, especially migrants—both domestic migrants within Mexico and international migrants.

Nevertheless, uncertainty in the offshore oil and gas industry is endemic. Despite improvements in technology, exploration remains highly speculative and extraction is risk ridden. The industry's work force is greatly affected by global market fluctuations, economic restructuring, and drilling legislation. Oil companies, in an effort to respond to uncertainties while maintaining high profits, have increasingly employed contract workers, rather than full-time permanent employees, for specialized projects and short-term or specialized needs. In effect, the burden of increasing uncertainties and risks is borne by workers. Workers may not know when the next job will line up, if they will be “let go” tomorrow, or if they will need to rush to a far-off worksite at a moment's notice to take advantage of a position available in a newly opened field or a damaged pipeline or rig after a hurricane.

Petroleum workers respond to various drivers of uncertainty with divergent, often improvised strategies. Some are captives of uncertainty; others fight it. But all are, in one way or another, involved in a battle against uncertainty (Mbembe 2000b:270).

Even from the beginning of the petroleum industry in the Gulf, certain activities, such as construction, were filled primarily by temporary workers. And today there are large sectors of the industry whose workforce is primarily temporary. These workers have no hope of stable employment independent of the growth of the industry or the advancement of new oil zones. In Mexico, these workers are referred to as *trabajadores transitorios* (transitory workers), which are in essence precarious internal migrant workers. They make up an increasing portion of the industry's workforce (Barbosa 2004).

## Research Contributions

Precarious work is a global problem with crosscutting challenges for scholars and policy makers. Kalleberg (2009) says there is a “current theoretical vacuum” in our understanding of the drivers of precarity and the possible solutions to it. This study offers a novel approach to addressing questions about globalization, migration, and industrial work. Many studies on contingent work rely on large-scale survey data or workplace demographics, satisfaction, and policies. By pursuing local-level meanings of precarious work, I reformulate dominant thinking on the impacts and contexts of global changes.

Documenting these workers’ lives both as guestworkers in the US and as precarious workers pursuing livelihoods in Mexico—both at home or other migratory destinations—I examine a class of worker that has rarely been taken up by social scientists. David Griffith's (2006) research stands as the only substantial cross-border study of H-2B workers. Transnational migration literatures underscore the importance of border-transcending ties, placing emphasis on social and political ties, defining “immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious and political—that span borders” (Basch et al. 1994:7). Yet anthropologists have not adequately described and theorized industrial and work relationships that are fostered and negotiated across borders. Additionally, my research looks at both domestic migrants—those who travel to work away from their homes—and international migrants within the same industry.

While international labor migration, and even some types of agricultural guest worker programs, have long been studied by social scientists, the H-2B visa’s use in heavy industry is little understood. Special-interest-group publications (Bauer 2008) and several recent court cases



have exposed misuse of these visas. Attempted legislative changes of the H-2B program (Bruno 2008) attest to flaws in the system. Systematic research on the H-2B program is lacking, apart from the industries that have historically employed H-2B workers, forestry and fishing.

Migration literature often focuses on the two extremes of migration: unauthorized, unskilled labor migrants and, on the other end of the spectrum, highly skilled migrants, who primarily work in the technology sector. This research attends to workers with distinct skill sets and training. Moreover, through in-depth study of the various structures in which H-2B visa holders act and react, the research will produce insight into the lives of temporary migrant oil workers.

Some state institutions become feeble in an increasingly transnational and globalized world. This study of industrial work in a globalized context exposes the policies and practices associated with mounting uncertainty (e.g., migration policies and guestworker programs). There are fundamental issues of scale at play here, as varying levels of governance impact individuals. What power do state-, substate, or local-level governments have vis-à-vis rich industry and transnational corporations? If policies are to be instituted to diminish workers' precarity, from where would the power of execution and enforcement come?

I answer Berner and Trulsson's (2000a:5) call to analyze the "specific features and causes of today's uncertainty and disorder," identifying workers' responses, or "strategies of action" (Swidler 1986). Workers respond to a multiplicity of uncertainties; exploring their responses will allow fuller understanding of local-level effects of global change and perhaps enable prediction of future actions of workers and their families.

Most research on labor and climate change deals with labor in the "green economy" (International Labor Organization 2010). Taking another perspective on labor and climate

change, my research explores how labor markets and demands may change in light of changing global and climate realities. Likewise, while there is much discussion about the economic, policy, and environmental impacts of our dependence on fossil fuels energy, there are relatively few ethnographies of workers' roles in this critical sector. I will help to fill these voids.

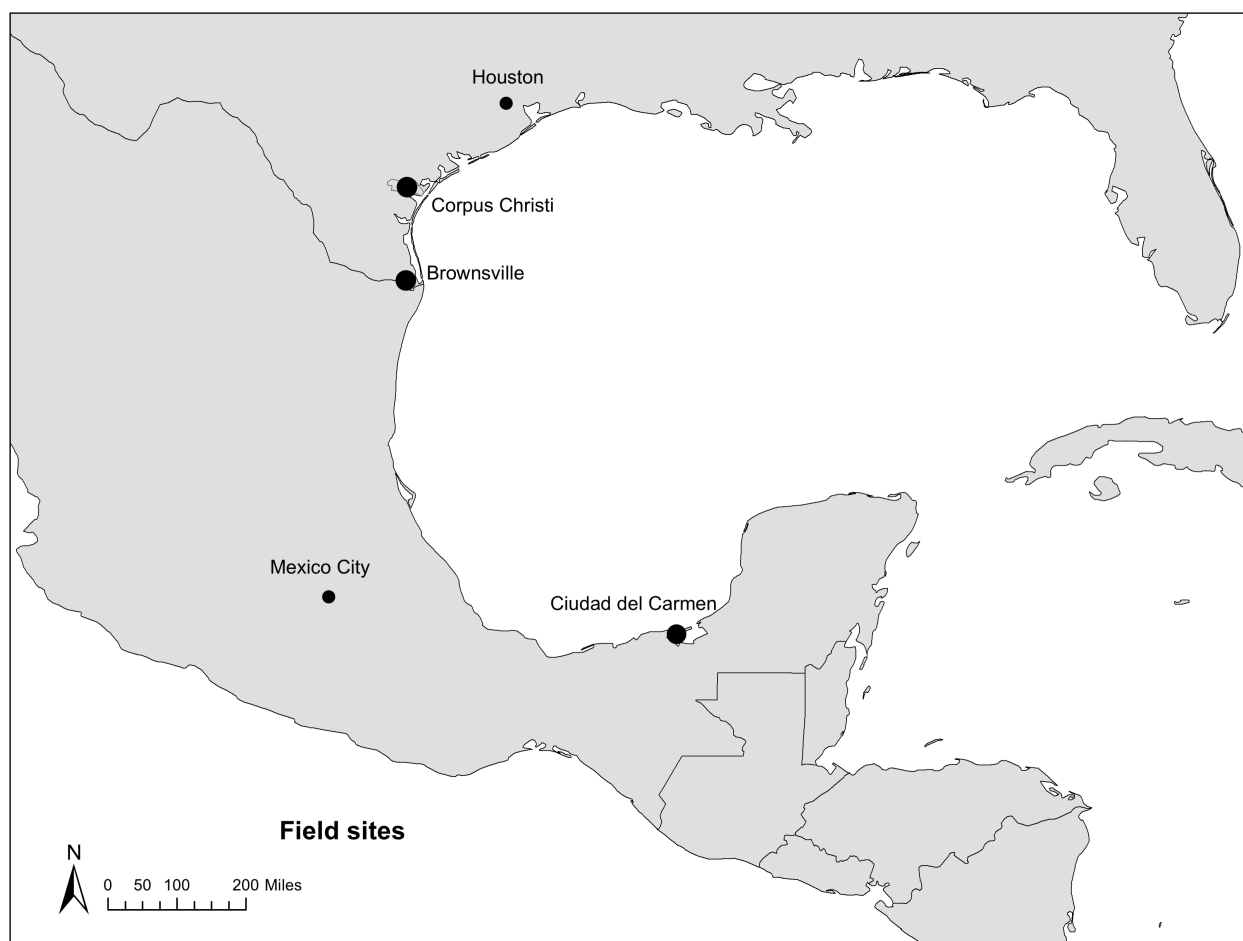
### Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 presents in greater detail the key questions, issues, and methods used in this research. Chapter 3 provides an exploration of the social life of Gulf of Mexico oil. It provides historical, geographic, political, and cultural context to this study. The casualization of labor in Gulf of Mexico oil industry, as well as the drivers and perceptions of such, is the focus of Chapter 4. I discuss workers' experiences of this uncertainty in Chapter 5. Tactics for navigating uncertainty are covered in Chapter 6. Taking an interdisciplinary approach in Chapter 7, I examine the oil industry, extreme weather events, and climate change. The final chapter offers conclusions and policy implications.

## **Chapter 2: Research Questions, Methods, and Data**

### **Research Objectives and Questions**

This dissertation is based on 14 months of fieldwork in two communities on the Gulf of Mexico. From February to August 2008, I conducted ethnographic research in the South Texas communities of Ingleside and Brownsville. This research was part of a three-year, six-community study of the fabrication and shipbuilding enterprises in Gulf communities in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas led by Drs. Diane Austin and Thomas McGuire of the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology at the University of Arizona. The project was funded by the US Minerals Management Service (MMS; since 2010, known as the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement, BOEMRE). Prompted by questions from this fieldwork, I returned to the Gulf of Mexico in 2012, this time to Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche, Mexico. I lived in Ciudad del Carmen from April to September 2012, and in October 2012 I revisited Ingleside, Texas.



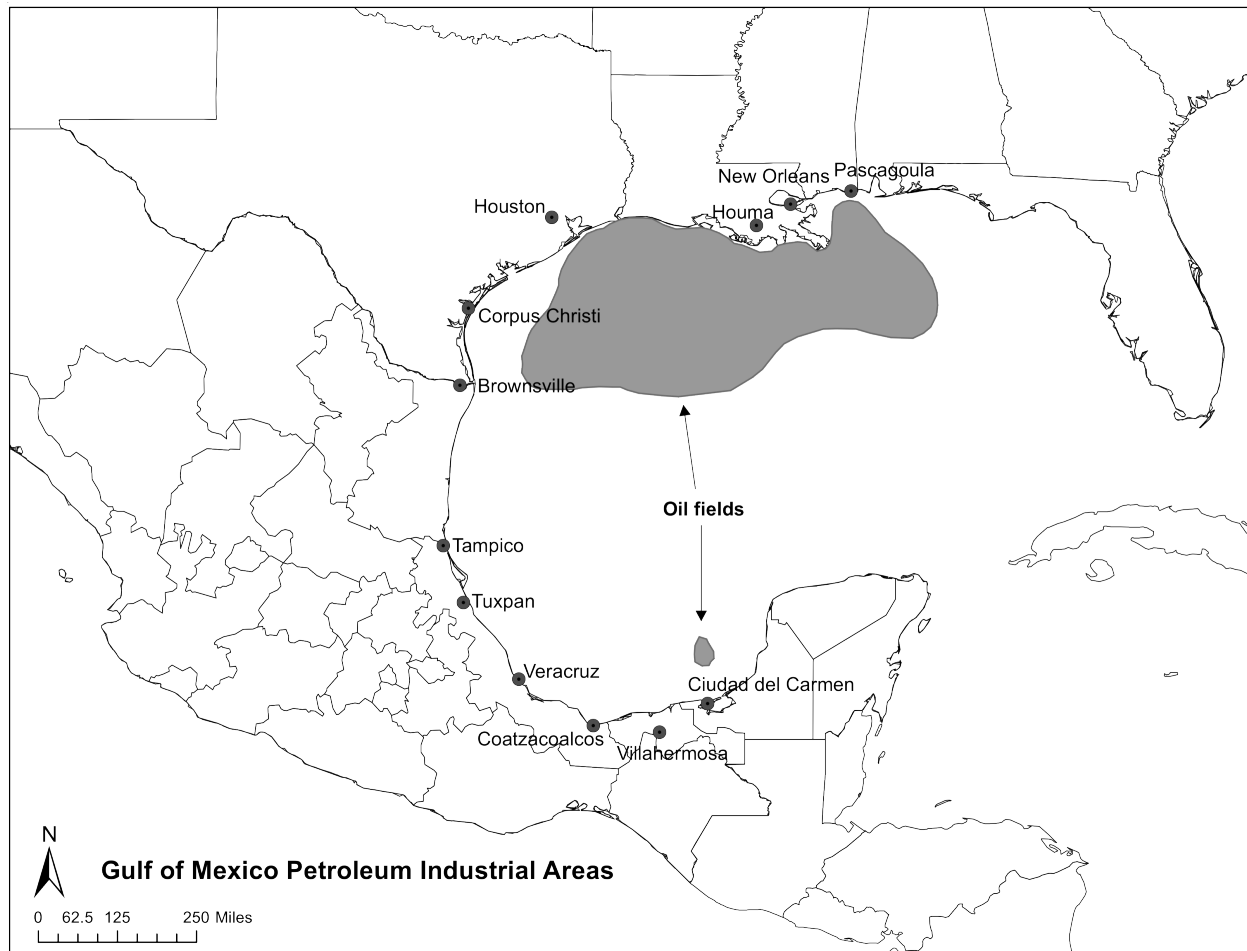
**Map 1: Map of the Gulf of Mexico, noting fieldsites: Corpus Christi and Brownsville, Texas, and Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche. Houston and Mexico City noted for reference.  
Map created by Andrés Lira Noriega, 2014.**

The primary objective of my research is to examine the role of uncertainty in migrant oil workers' everyday lives and the maneuvers they employ to navigate precarious livelihoods. To understand how individuals who gain their livelihoods from precarious oil industry employment are entangled in oil geopolitics, labor market changes, and climate variability, my research : 1) explores the context of how certain workers in the oil industry enter and remain in contingent employment situations and 2) documents tactics workers develop to navigate uncertainty and, if possible, diminish it.

In Texas and Ciudad del Carmen, I collected qualitative and some quantitative data from participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, informal interviews and conversations, occupational histories, and newspapers. I use pseudonyms for individual workers and family members, although not at the request of individual respondents, most of whom were surprisingly candid, open, and eager to share their experiences and expertise with me. The first instance of a pseudonym in each chapter will be in quotation marks, e.g., “Eduardo.” Camouflaging individuals' names is critical: some respondents fear blacklisting and other repercussions for disclosing company practices or tactics they have used to gain and maintain employment. Geographical locations, companies, and historical or public figures are not given pseudonyms.

### Field Sites

Coordinating my research in the petroleum industry north of the border with research sites in Mexico, I drew from Marcus (1995) and Fitzgerald (2006), who argue for multi-sited fieldwork in anthropology. According to Marcus (1995:99), “mult-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography.” He urges ethnographers to “follow the people,” “follow the thing,” and “follow the metaphor.” Fitzgerald (2006:1) emphasizes the importance of removing “national blinders” to conceive of and compare internal and international migration within the same frame.



**Map 2: Map of the Gulf of Mexico, noting cities important to the petroleum industry and offshore oil fields. Map created by Andrés Lira Noriega, 2014.**

Petroleum-related shipbuilding and fabrication was the largest employer of immigrant labor along the outer continental shelf before the hurricanes of 2005. A number of coastal communities have relied on these industries, which support and shape their populations and their economic and social systems in dynamic ways. These communities, accordingly, are sensitive to geopolitical trends, industrial cycles, technological developments, and the petroleum industry's geographic shifts.

Shipyards and fabrication facilities along the Gulf kept busy refurbishing and upgrading the existing fleet and repairing damaged rigs and platforms. Following the hurricanes of 2005, the Minerals Management Service mandated new design specifications, effectively downgrading the water-depth capabilities ratings of many of the existing rigs and upgrading rig fitness requirements, thus requiring platform repairs and retrofitting. This surge in repair work increased demand for labor, expanding the need for importing craft labor in the industry.

Neither shipbuilding and fabrication nor its dynamic interactions with host communities have been well described or analyzed. Minerals Management Services contracted researchers at the University of Houston, Nicholls State University, and the University of Arizona's Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology (BARA) to describe the industries, the services they provide, their labor demands and how they meet them. The study, conducted by ethnographers, demographers, and historians, attempts to provide information about the industries' geographic distribution, environmental impacts, trends, dynamics, and demographic and socioeconomic significance. It focuses on the Gulf's petroleum-related sectors, on their similarities and differences, and on their socioeconomic consequences to the Gulf of Mexico region.

### **Ingleside**

I first went to Ingleside, Texas, in February 2008, after finishing my M.A. and before beginning doctoral coursework. As a contracted research associate with BARA, I was excited to put my new degree and skills to use. I was to become a "real ethnographer." I drove from Houston, where I rented a car, and met Tom McGuire, research anthropologist at BARA, in Ingleside, where he had done fieldwork years before. Tom drove me around Ingleside and Aransas Pass to acquaint me with where I would live for the next few months. Together, we met

with a county commissioner and went to several area restaurants and bars. At first we both stayed at an extended-stay hotel, where, in fact, many subcontractors live and often fill to no-vacancy for months on end. Extended-stay hotels cater to transient workers; in fact, some yards contract with entire hotels for their H-2B workers while they are working in the US. By luck, within a few days I found a room to rent with a local woman, who worked across the bay in Corpus Christi. Having shown me the fieldsite and provided several contacts for my fieldwork, Tom left after a couple days, and I was on my own.

The Coastal Bend, a 12-county region centered on Corpus Christi (population 305,215) (US Census 2010), has over a century of history with the oil industry. Ingleside and Aransas Pass are the primary industry towns in the otherwise agricultural San Patricio County. Ingleside is home to Kiewit Offshore Services and Gulf Marine Fabricators, two large fabrication yards that build offshore oil platforms. Both Gulf Marine and Kiewit employ over 2,000 workers each, many of whom are contingent workers or contractors. They both have employed Mexican craft laborers on H-2B visas or subcontract with companies who have H-2B workers. Ancillary businesses and labor contractors cover the coastal landscape, and at least four businesses had more than 100 H-2B workers at any given time during my 2008 fieldwork. Another segment of the industry engaged in the illicit sale or purchase of H-2B visas. .

*Ingleside Initial Contacts.* Through an area real estate agent and the mayor pro tem, I met a woman who was looking to rent a room in her home, which she shared with her daughter and grandchildren. I lived there through April 2008, when I moved to a studio apartment. Although her family was not connected with the industry per se, living with them connected me with the



area. During Texas Hold ‘em games with her friends from the naval base and contacts through her mother with long-time residents, I settled into life in Ingleside.

In early February I struck up a conversation with a group of veracruzano welders at a *taquería*. Two of these men, “Alonso” and “Diego,” and later one of their co-workers, “Jorge,” became key informants. From them I learned about the experiences of H-2B workers, the difference between various types of welding tests and classifications of welders, and how to make amazing *caldo de mariscos*. Alonso and I have remained in close contact over the years, and he has kept me abreast of his decisions, activities, successes, failures, and, unfortunately, accidents.

The newspaper offices of the *Ingleside Index* and the *Aransas Pass Progress* became my home base. The publisher offered me desk space and use of the Internet. The reporters and office staff provided several important contacts, insights into the community, and a much-needed social outlet during lunch break chats. The retired publisher who kept an office there provided me, with a single phone call, entrée into the seemingly impenetrable community of industry officials in the large fabrication yards.

*Daily Routine.* As an outsider, I was not able to participate in every aspect of daily life of employers and contractors. My daily routine, therefore, centered on being in places where I could participate in and observe pieces of individuals' daily activities. Each morning I went to a local gym and exercised for about an hour. The gym offered discounts to employees of several companies and contractors. Afterward, I went to my cubicle at the newspaper office where I prepared interviews, made calls, looked through the archives, and wrote interviews and fieldnotes. I frequented taquerías and the local Vietnamese noodle shop for lunch and dinner,

which turned into the best places to strike up conversations with workers either just leaving work from first shift or heading to second shift. In the evenings, after Alonso, Diego, and Jorge arrived home and showered, we often spent evenings chatting, drinking beers or sodas, and sometimes making ceviche or another seafood dish.

As time went on and I made more contacts, I often spent afternoons in a labor contractor's office near one of the fabrication yards. There, "Richie" and "Francisco," partners and co-owners, told me how they learned of labor demands and secured contracts, where they worked, and how they found enough workers with adequate skills. After getting my foot in the door at one of the large fabrication yards and interviewing several supervisors and human resources executives, I was able to attend Spanish and English new-hire orientations and tour the yard several times.

### **Mexico Visits**

For a week during the summer of 2008, I traveled to Tuxpan, Veracruz, a small industrial city and migrant sending community. There I visited Jorge's wife and family. Together we explored the city, talked about how it is to have Jorge live and work in Texas, and their experiences when he comes home after his visa expires. In January 2011, I travelled to Mexico, met Alonso in Xalapa, Veracruz, his home town, and we travelled together to Angel R. Cabada, Veracruz, where we met our mutual friend—one of my Ingleside key informants—Diego. We toured around the area, Diego pointing out the sugar cane fields he worked in as a teenager. These trips to Mexico petroleum centers and oil-migrant sending communities gave me a first look at the breadth of the oil industry's impact within the labor sector.

## **Ciudad del Carmen**

Ciudad del Carmen (population roughly 154,197 at the 2005 population count) is a small city with a big history in the offshore oil boom. I conducted fieldwork in Ciudad del Carmen because migrant workers I interviewed in Texas repeatedly mentioned it as a place they worked when not in the United States or where they learned their craft skills.

Ciudad del Carmen, nicknamed “The Pearl of the Gulf,” was a sleepy fishing village until the late-1970s when fisherman Rudesindo Cantarell reported oil seepage ruining his fishing nets. This find, eventually named after Cantarell, put Mexico on the global petroleum map for the first time since the 1920s: Cantarell, at the time, was the largest in Mexico, a supergiant oil field that peaked production at 2.1 million barrels per day in 2003. Mexico's nationalized oil company, Pemex, now bases its Subdirectorate for the Southwest Marine Exploration and Production in Ciudad del Carmen. Unlike other Mexican petroleum enclaves, such as Tampico or Coatzacoalcos on the Gulf of Mexico, Ciudad del Carmen is not a union stronghold. In fact, one could say that if privatization is creeping in on Mexican oil, it will gain its foothold in Ciudad del Carmen. Trans- and multinational companies, such as Halliburton and Schlumberger, dot the landscape. Workers, coming in from the oil fields or waiting to be contracted, quite literally fill the plaza; some 14,000 are contract workers in the oil industry. The juxtaposition of oil industry and ready labor makes Ciudad del Carmen ideal to learn more about the impacts of contingent labor.

The flight to Ciudad del Carmen from Mexico City takes a little over an hour and a half. A bus ride, even in Mexico's premier bus lines, takes between 12 and 14 hours and costs nearly as much as a flight. Despite the price and length of travel time, I chose to arrive to the island by

bus, thinking that many workers may take the bus. They do. Most others on the bus were journeying to Ciudad del Carmen to find work or to return to their jobs. One man I sat next to, an electrician, makes the trip between Mexico City and Ciudad del Carmen monthly.

For two months (April and May 2012) I lived with a friend's relatives, a couple who both worked for Pemex—she as a chemist and he as an information technology specialist. With them, I went out to eat, celebrated Mothers' Day (one of the biggest holidays in Mexico), and family birthdays. Although they knew the petroleum industry intimately through their work with Pemex, they held privileged positions as individuals with education and exclusive union membership.

After my first official interview in Ciudad del Carmen, I met “David,” an electronic technician, and “José Luis,” a maintenance mechanic technician, while eating breakfast at a restaurant on Good Friday. We began talking about my research, why I was in Carmen, and about their jobs. We quickly became friends and when the opportunity arose to move into their house, which was ideally located on a bus route and near the city center, I jumped on it. Through my friendship with David and José Luis, I experienced first hand the life of workers with jobs in the petroleum industry that are stable, with opportunities for promotion, and with great benefits. Their positions stand in stark contrast to those workers who are hired on a project basis. Even so, I learned the nuances of uncertainty in the oil industry from them. They were also valuable resources for understanding the industry in general, labor issues in Mexico, and the numerous acronyms, slang, and shortened names used in the region and industry.

*Ciudad del Carmen Initial Contacts.* Meeting workers would be easy, I thought, as the plaza in Ciudad del Carmen normally is full of men looking for work or waiting to leave for stints offshore. I learned, however, that I had to collect any information I really wanted from them as

soon as possible — in a matter moments they could get a call for an interview or to board the lancha to the platform where they would work for the coming weeks. Although I was in the plaza for several hours nearly every day, I never became a “fixture” to anyone except the boleros (shoe shiners), the teenager girls selling aguas frescas (flavored waters), or the woman at the newspaper stand.

*Daily Routine.* In Ciudad del Carmen I was particularly interested in talking to people searching for work, so I established a daily routine with those individuals in mind. In a region where the average temperature hovered over 90° Fahrenheit during my fieldwork, this meant finding shade or air conditioning in mid-afternoon, preferably with a cool drink. Each morning I walked to the taxi stand or a bus stop, pausing at a pozol stand to chat with the vendor and get a plastic bag full of the refreshing ground corn-based chocolate drink. Most days I sat in the main plaza and talked with people. The plaza is never empty, and usually three populations fill it: 1) men ready to board boats to go work on offshore oil platforms; 2) workers coming onshore and waiting for buses to take them home; and 3) people looking for work, gripping their plastic folders containing their work dossiers. In the heat of the day, I conducted interviews in cafes or on the boardwalk, or worked in the air-conditioned comfort of my house or in a cafe. Most evenings I spent with the family I lived with at the beginning of my fieldwork, watching movies, talking, or writing as other family members worked or surfed the Internet. When I moved into the city, I spent more of my evenings over drinks or dinner with oil workers. Wide-ranging conversations—from politics to infidelity to frustrations with company policies—provided me with insights into workers’ experiences and opinion.

*Key Informants.* Indicative of what anthropologists refer to as a key informant is the individual's ability to not only share experiences and expertise, but perhaps more importantly to really understand the researcher's questions and goals. "Pablo," a young man who was looking for work offshore in Ciudad del Carmen, quickly grasped the crux of my research. I met him one afternoon in the plaza early in my fieldwork and he remained an important resource. Over several months Pablo shared his successes and failures, his tactics for getting hired, and his frustrations with being laid off. I shared my questions, hesitations, and doubts with him. "Daniel" also eventually became a key informant, introducing me to his friends and past coworkers, recounting the daily struggles of living with extended family and with no income, and giving me sometimes to-the-minute updates over instant messages on his phone.

### Community Entrée and Participant Observation

The hallmark of ethnography is participant observation, in which the ethnographer takes part in daily activities of the people being studied while maintaining an analytical perspective on what she is participating in. Participant observation can offer the ethnographer an intimate viewpoint of the lives of those studied — where actions and relationships between individuals and groups speak volumes. Key to participant observation is the researcher's ability to gain entrée with a group and establish rapport. However, this dissertation is not a study of a bounded community. It is a study of a transient, mobile population of workers in a complex, global industry. Because I am interested in learning about and from workers in an industry that spans borders and is located at once in offices and fabrication yards (nearly always fenced off and guarded) and also offshore, I worked to gain access to a range of activities, groups, and individuals.

During my fieldwork in the Gulf of Mexico, I had to build trust and gain *entrée* in two disparate, yet related locales: Ingleside, Texas (and the surrounding areas, including Aransas Pass and industrial parts of Corpus Christi) and Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche. The cities, more than 1,100 miles apart, are related by industry and workforce — you see some of the same companies, and even workers, in both places. The utter size of my study area, and the fact that at times potentially rich sites were inaccessible, required me to become strategic and inventive. At every turn I looked for opportunities to learn and become involved with different aspects of work in the oil industry — from educational facilities to workplace orientations; from labor contractors' offices to so-called third spaces, where workers congregated, conducted non-work activities, and relaxed.

When I began my fieldwork, and as I continued, I was often reminded that building trust and establishing rapport with a highly mobile and transient population is not easy. As budding ethnographers in graduate school we learn that trust and rapport are time intensive. In the oil industry, time is factored as a cost that should be reduced as much as possible: fabrication and oil servicing companies can be charged millions of dollars a day for not making deadlines. Workers hear of companies contracting workers and are available to start, at times, within hours. A repair may need to be made offshore, and within minutes assembled teams of workers bid farewell to their loved ones, only to return on some unforeseen date in the future. Placed in this mix, I had to cast off all my need for to-the-minute scheduling. I was not in control, and at first I struggled to understand that individuals I wanted to learn from and talk to were not either. They, too, are at mercy of the oil industry. Rather than making acquaintances, nurturing relationships, and gaining

trust over time, I found that I could learn a lot from someone during a focused, yet chatty, ten-minute interview.

*Rural Southern Campeche.* In late April 2012, I traveled to southern Campeche, very near the Guatemala border, with four men who had been trying to find work in Ciudad del Carmen for nearly three months. I had spoken with them several times and we gained mutual trust. In effect, I accompanied them to their home community as they hung their heads and told their families that, again, they were not able to find work and would have to return to Ciudad del Carmen in a few weeks. I spent three days in this rural area, talking with their families, eating deer one of them shot the morning after returning home, and drinking tequila with one of their mothers. This experience allowed me to gain a fuller understanding of motivations for pursuing work in Ciudad del Carmen, the precarious yet honorable livelihoods in rural areas in Mexico, and the experiences of these men's families.

*Research on the Fly.* Because I often met people who would potentially be helpful to my research in fleeting situations, such as on lunch hours or in line for an agua fresca on a hot day in the park, I had to be able to quickly strike up conversations that were at once salient, informational, and interesting. At first I struggled with this because I knew so very little about the oil industry and its workers. Essentially I was ignorant and tried to absorb everything I learned and then incorporate that information into later conversations. Each interview I conducted with a supervisor, laborer, community member, or educator helped me understand the situation better and thus improve subsequent interviews.

*Use of Technology and Social Media.* Like other contracted workers, within a few days of arriving to both Ingleside and Ciudad del Carmen, I bought a cellular phone with a local number.



This facilitated communication with respondents, as they were able to not only call me, but use other methods to contact me. In Ingleside in 2008, most workers preferred to text me, while supervisors and managers still preferred to call. Text messages are not only financially economical—costing much less than a phone call— but also are seen as efficient ways to set appointments or change plans. In Ciudad del Carmen, four years later, while text messages and cellular phone calls were still important, younger workers I talked with preferred to contact me via various social media, such as Facebook, and other smart-phone messaging applications. With the growing prevalence of smart phones and WiFi in public places, while many of the acquaintances I made with workers were fleeting, a number of them have maintained contact with me even after I have returned from the field. Aided by newer technologies that are only recently more readily available and less costly, even an unemployed person who purchased a smart phone when he had a job is able to remain in contact with loved ones and potential employers (not to mention the occasional gringa researcher).

### Data Collected

#### **Texas**

In Texas I conducted a total of 74 interviews. These included interviews with craft laborers, such as welders and pipe fitters; industry officials, such as supervisors and company owners; labor contractors; educators; and others involved in community issues, such as economic development and commerce. Each interview was digitally recorded and lasted between 30 minutes and three hours. I followed the BARA interview protocol, which included completing an occupational timeline and exploring issues of work force demand, training, company practices, changes in the industry, and community issues.

## **Ciudad del Carmen**

I conducted a total of 34 semi-structured interviews in Ciudad del Carmen. These interviews were primarily with workers and men looking for work, but also included wives and family members. Over one-third of the semi-structured interviews were with workers contracted by companies on a per-project basis; another third were men looking for work. Of the final third, half were conducted with family members of workers and those looking for work and half with men employed in stable, long-term jobs. I adapted the BARA interview protocol for these interviews, keeping the occupational timeline and other domains, but adding explorations on uncertainty. Daily in the plaza of Ciudad del Carmen and other areas around the city, I held numerous informal yet informative conversations with workers. Often, these conversations turned into naturally occurring focus groups, in which a group sitting in the plaza would talk together about topics I would bring up about the industry, the job search, migration. Although casual and not digitally recorded, these conversations provided a wealth of information and a greater understanding of workers' lives and experiences.

## **Other Interviews and Data from BARA Research**

As I was fortunate to be a part the BARA six-community study, with fieldworkers located throughout the US Gulf of Mexico, I am able to use and analyze transcripts from interviews I did not personally conduct. Of the over 700 interviews and 10 focus groups conducted by 10 fieldworkers, I have identified 260 as especially helpful, offering distinct insight into my particular research questions. These are interviews that focus on themes of migration, foreign workers, H-2B visas, precarious work, workforce demands, and the effects of hurricanes and

extreme weather on labor demand. Additionally, BARA researchers compiled 626 relevant newspaper articles from the six study communities.

**Table 2: Interviews by employment sector and interview location**

	<b>Texas</b>	<b>Mexico</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>% of Total Interviews</b>
<b>Unemployed</b>	1	13	14	13%
<b>Employed (contractor)</b>	5	9	14	13%
<b>Employed (permanent)</b>	5	7	12	11%
<b>Employed (contractor, H-2B)</b>	11	0	11	10%
<b>Supervisor</b>	23	0	23	21%
<b>Labor contractor</b>	9	0	9	8%
<b>Government</b>	7	0	7	6%
<b>Education</b>	11	0	11	10%
<b>Agriculture (100% livelihood)</b>	0	3	3	3%
<b>Wife (no work in agriculture)</b>	0	2	2	2%
<b>Miscellaneous, community</b>	2	0	2	2%
<b>Total Interviews per site</b>	74	34	108	

### Chapter 3: On Shifting Sands: Social Life of Oil

*And yet the anthropology of just homely, everyday substances may help us to clarify both how the world changes from what it was to what it may become, and how it manages at the same time to stay in certain regards very much the same.*

Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*

It is difficult to imagine a day without petroleum. Thousand of cars clog rush-hour traffic in any city. Red-eye flights allow jet setters to weekend on one coast and work on the other. The fruits and vegetables we take home from the supermarket in plastic containers and bags were likely transported thousands of miles. As most Americans rev up their car to go to work, turn on their computer, or, for that matter, sit with moisturized skin, in a room painted with acrylic paint, listening to music imprinted on a CD (all products made of petrochemicals), they rarely think of the individuals and communities that produce fuels and the multitude of other petroleum-based materials they take for granted.

Oil has changed the world quickly and drastically. Unlike any other force, petroleum propels our lives. And though one quickly becomes accustomed to the conveniences hydrocarbon use affords us, we are only beginning to realize its long-term consequences. There is no way around it: oil is a global issue. Petroleum extraction and consumption fuels aggressions and alliances. The geopolitics of energy are nuanced, complex, and at times quite volatile.

“To a great many Americans, oil is bad” (Ghosh 1992:30). Oil calls one to think of perilous dependency, foreign imbroglios, uncertain situations, environmental hazards and disasters. People shouting “drill, baby, drill!” at political rallies focus on issues of energy security and independence. Television reports often tune viewers' focus to issues of large scale: environmental degradation or danger and financial gain or collapse. Yet few “really [know]

anything at all about the human experiences surrounding the production of oil” (ibid.), a story that is multilingual and multinational.

For just over a century, individuals, families, and communities along the Gulf of Mexico have been affected by oil: health has been sacrificed; environments and landscapes have been altered or destroyed; workplaces have been converted to sites of what Nixon (2002:6) calls “invisible casualties.” The story of oil includes transnational corporations and lives. Its themes are booms and busts, labor, near-slavery, the interplay of environment and social structures, geopolitics and its effects on communities and individuals.

This chapter responds to Hitchcock's (2010:97) call to “rethink the complex ways in which oil economies have fashioned cultural formations (and foreign policies) bent on curtailing or displacing opposition to the rationale of oil extraction” by examining its social life and cultural biography (Appadurai 1986). We know this thing, this viscous liquid that is converted into multiple usable forms, shapes our daily lives in myriad ways—from how we budget our spending to with whom our country is at war to if we eat fruits and vegetables “out of season.” Appadurai (1986:5) says we “have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things.”

### Social Life of Oil

For thousands of years humans warmed themselves and cooked food by burning carbon-based natural materials such as wood or dry animal dung—sun energy converted by plants and then used for heat. Extracting and gathering natural resources has always been labor intensive. Yet today, rather than individuals gathering wood or other combustibles, the majority of our

energy is supplied by “ancient sun-energy stored beneath the earth” (Crain 2010:353) in the form of petroleum, oil, natural gas, and coal.

The materiality of today's fuels is pushed out of sight. Rarely do we see or touch the fuels we use on a daily basis. I am separated from the materiality of petroleum by meters and gauges that I trust to correctly measure (in gallons or kilowatt hours) the amount I use. I don't usually smell of the fuels I use. And the greatest physical effort I exert to procure the energy I consume is swiping a credit card at the filling station. While buried energy requires much force and risk to extract, most individuals take it for granted when they start up their car or flip a light switch. The relationship between petroleum and people is a highly dynamic one. Strauss, Rupp and Love (2013:19) note that the notion that oil is both artifact and artifice is important. “Oil exists as a material substance (an artifact) even as its existence serves to create social, political, and economic structures (artifices) that organize societies for whom petroleum and its derivatives are foundational” (ibid.).

Each step of energy production—from petroleum to power—plays a role in the value of the commodity. It is not merely the potential bound up in the hydrocarbon molecules; it is also about “all that goes into its movement across boundaries—pipelines, platforms, and power lines but also planning bureaus, maps, tables, government engineers, and reunions of experts” (Breglia et al. 2013:313).

*Chaîne Opératoire* is an archaeological method used to determine how an object came to hold certain values, by uncovering the labor, processes, and raw materials that imbue an object or thing with value. Understanding the materiality of oil helps us understand its value as energy. Specialized extraction equipment. Knowledge and proprietary practices of refining to transform

an underground liquid into a usable product. Transportation and marketing of commodities. All these materialities give meaning to what we often conceive as the invisible or immaterial “magical power of energy” (Weszkalnys 2013:267).

Exploration, production, and refining are the processes by which naturally occurring crude oil are selected, shaped, and transformed into usable products with cultural values. Workers with varying skills and training are involved at each point. Once exploratory wells have been drilled and proven to have viable reserves, production crews and platforms go on site and begin extracting the crude oil. Crude oil—unrefined, unprocessed petroleum—is primarily obtained by drilling into the earth's surface.<sup>4</sup> Crude oil is under pressure and flows from reservoir rocks through pores in the well casing and to pipelines. If oil pressure is inadequate, gas, such as nitrogen, or liquids are pumped in to push the oil out. This is a typical method, known as secondary or tertiary recovery, of getting the most oil out of declining fields. Oil is then transported to refineries and petrochemical plants, where it is converted by various processes into fuels: diesel, gasoline, lubricating oil, and kerosene.

### **Value and Creation of Commodity**

“Value is never an inherent property of objects, but is a judgment made about them by subjects” (Appadurai 1986:3). Politics of value, how goods move in and out of circulation while reproducing and transforming society, help us understand the effect of society's demand for petroleum on society itself. The word petroleum comes from the Greek, *petra* (rock) and the Latin, *oleum* (oil). Made of a complex mixture of hydrocarbons and other compounds that vary by geography, petroleum is a viscous yellow to black liquid found in certain subterranean geological formations. Petroleum comes from plankton, algae, and other small plants and

animals that died millions of years ago and decayed in sedimentary layers at the ocean floor in the absence of oxygen. With heat and pressure, the organic material became crude oil and natural gas and accumulated in reservoir rock, usually porous rocks such as limestone or sandstone. These sponge-like reservoir rocks, surrounded by impermeable rock, trap the petroleum. And there it stayed for millions of years, without value, until humans found it useful.

The Olmec and Maya of the Precolumbian Gulf of Mexico used *chapopote*, the Nahuatl word for bitumen (crude oil after the elimination of certain volatile elements). These groups used the chapopote from seeps on land or water as a sealant, adhesive, and construction and waterproofing material (Wendt and Lu 2006:91). Yet for most, chapopote was nothing more than a “local curiosity” (Rubio 2003:1) or annoyance (as it could cover fishermen's nets from seeps in shallow waters) for centuries. It was not until the mid-19th century that commercial oil refining emerged as an economical alternative to whale oil. The demand for cheap lighting fuel worldwide quickly grew. The oil rush began in Titusville, Pennsylvania, in 1859, widely considered the location of the first modern oil well and oil boom (see Black 2003). It quickly spread to other parts of the world, including the Gulf of Mexico at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

With newly developed uses and methods for extracting and refining petroleum, such as lighting, power, and lubrication, petroleum began to gain value. Strauss (2013:15) says that: “uses of and relations to energy are intimately connected with people's social values and images of energy and its associated technologies; how people use energy is related to how people value it; and how people value energy is related to what it enables them to accomplish not only materially but also socially.”



Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century petroleum began to perform invaluable functions. Before the widespread use of coal-derived electric lighting, kerosene lit homes and hospitals. Petroleum ignited the internal combustion engine, and the horseless carriage marked the dawn of the automobile age. Petroleum was valued for what it did. But people began to also ascribe it value for what it symbolized. Daniel Yergin, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Prize* (2008), says petroleum is not only pervasive in our day-to-day activities, it is a “symbol of human progress,” something society is not wont to give up.

Petroleum began to carry promises of wealth. But, as Watts (2001:61) says, it is steeped with “fetishistic qualities” and is cloaked in a “rich mysticism of abundance, affluence, human greed, and power” (Weszkalnys 2013:268). One need not search long to find references in popular culture to the dark side of oil. The movie *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), set during the height of the oil boom in the then-jungles surrounding Tampico, Mexico, highlights back-breaking work, withheld pay, and betrayal. *There Will Be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson 2007), loosely based on Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* and the life of oil baron Edward Doheny, features a ruthless, ultimately rich yet lonely California oilman. Television series *The Beverly Hillbillies* (Paul Henning 1962-1971), and *Dallas* (Caprice et al. 1978-1991) showcase the wealth, treason, and ambition associated with oil. The story of oil is complex and varied, yet the leitmotifs of individual ambition and the role of technology are the same.

Today oil is a major item of international trade, a crucial source of international political power, and an object of vicious economic and political competition.

energy...never just 'is'; energy is always connecting, integrating, and reinforcing people and nature while also dismantling, undermining, and reorganizing these relationships and boundaries....[T]he structural reality of the objective world is always affected by and reflected in the cultural filters. People—particularly 'local'

people in resource-regions but also communities of engineers, managers, planners, oil workers, and wider publics—use to make sense of changes thrust upon them by processes emanating from the voracious appetite of the global growth system (Breglia et al. 2013:312).

Oil has a multifaceted life (Economides et al. 2000). Each of these facets corresponds to different interactions between people and petroleum. Oil is a physical material with a history of formation. This physical material also interacts with geologists locating it and field engineers and roughnecks working to drill and extract it in the oilfield. The material reality of oil serves as symbol of our age—using force, willpower, and technology to wrangle from nature what we want. And the oil industry's infrastructures—monumental platforms, continent-spanning pipelines, and the recognizable oil well pump—serve as the “great icons of our extractive age, and both suppress and enable forms of oil’s magic and its contestation. Oil’s material presence is blatant, overwhelming, awe-inspiring, and terrifying” (Weszkalnys 2013:270).

The supply and demand of oil ties together geographies of power and knowledge, even as these ties are strung taut with aggression, globalization of knowledge, price fixing, and the history of wars, colonization, and empires. Yergin (2008:xiv) claims the 20th century was entirely transformed by the “advent of petroleum....The role of oil—and anxiety about its supply—is a primary consideration of the era of globalization that characterizes the first decades of the twenty-first century.”

The most common-sense definition of a commodity is “an item with use value that also has exchange value” (Kopytoff 1986:64). The cultural-commodity view, that commodities have a life of their own and acquire and lose value as they move in and out of exchange spheres, is presented by archaeologists Preceul and Hodder (1996). The commodification of petroleum involves a cultural and cognitive process. It is not merely produced materially. It is something

that is culturally marked as a certain kind of thing (Kopytoff 1986:64). Petroleum is a commodity because it is produced by human labor, has use and exchange value to humans.

In Mexico, oil companies had to create a Mexican market for oil. More important than producing Mexican petroleum was creating a demand in Mexico for petroleum products. Even past the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Mexicans had no need for oil and thus did not value it. Mexico at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not have many, if any, paved roads nor large-scale railroads. British and American oil companies, led by the likes of Edward Doheny, Sir Weetman Pearson, and Henry Clay Pierce, created in Mexico the domestic market to which they would later sell petroleum products (Brown and Knight 1992). More than merely selling oil, companies vied for political power and pushed for the construction of roads, railroads, and finally for petroleum leases. Later, when Lázaro Cardenas, President of Mexico from 1934-1940, expropriated the oil industry, creating a nationalized industry, oil acquired symbolic and patriotic value for the Mexican people. It is a symbol of sovereignty that has continued to this day.<sup>5</sup>

### **Social and Political Relations of Production**

Important to this research are the social and political relations of oil production. Even while most people are not aware of the day-to-day experiences of those working in the oil industry, we are all consumers of oil and are therefore involved in the social and political issues of production: the resource curse, subsurface minerals ownership, and territoriality.

“Democratic machineries that emerged to govern the age of carbon energy” (Mitchell 2009:399) and the age of fossil fuel energy quite possibly created what we know as 20<sup>th</sup>-century democracy and its limits. Timothy Mitchell follows carbon through exploration, discovery, extraction, and beyond. He focuses on the importance of understanding the “nodes and

networks” involved in the conversion of fossil fuels to “energy, profits, and political power.” The transformation begins with those workers who bring it out of the ground. Mitchell believes understanding the properties of oil— how it can and must be transported; the networks used to regulate its flow; and the political and social institutions that deal with energy, finance, and other carbon-related issues—is important for understanding the global situations we find ourselves in today. Oil’s future was at its beginning a “limitless horizon of growth” (ibid.:422), yet today we realize there are indeed limits, and the curious relationships engineered in oil’s times of plenty were quite different from during coal’s heyday.

Using examples from coal and oil, Mitchell (2009:421) follows “a particular set of connections that were engineered between carbon fuels and certain kinds of democratic and undemocratic politics.” Coal miners contested labor regimes and were three times as prone to strike as other workers in the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (ibid.:404). “The militancy of the miners can be attributed in part to the fact that moving carbon stores from the coal seam to the surface created unusually autonomous places and methods of work” (ibid.), thus democratizing the workforce. On the other hand, the transition from an energy system based on coal to one of oil opened the door for more undemocratic politics:

the material qualities and physical locations of oil made things different from with coal. Since it comes to the surface driven by underground pressure, either from the water trapped beneath it or the gas above it, oil required a smaller workforce than coal in relation to the quantity of energy produced. Workers remained above ground, under the continuous supervision of managers (ibid.: 407).

Workers involved in extracting oil have little autonomy and are quite literally commanded what to do by the field’s experts. While coal miners developed skills, a craft, and autonomy in the mine, the oil industry distributes more of the expertise of production into the offices of managers and engineers.

Citizens of fossil-fuel and other mineral exporting countries, such as Nigeria, Venezuela, and Angola, have often fared poorer than resource-poor countries, even considering the revenue gains collected by oil exporting countries. This is termed the “paradox of plenty” or the “resource curse” (Eifert et al. 2002:202). States that depend on oil revenues tend to be less democratic than others (Karl 1997). Mitchell (2009; 2011) believes countries dependent on fossil fuels, especially in times of threatening depletion and climate change, will experience issues they will be even more ill equipped to address than ever before.

Ferguson (2005:379) points out that globalized capital should not be characterized as something that flows like oil and covers space and time. Rather, the “movements of capital cross national borders, but they jump point to point, and huge areas are simply bypassed.” These petro-enclaves show that capital “flow” merely connects “discrete points on [the globe].”

Although the United States is a major producer of oil, subsurface minerals are owned by individuals or corporations, and the oil industry is fully privatized, unlike in most of the world. Mexico, on the other hand, has had a nationalized oil industry since 1938. Though Mexicans have not suffered from the resource curse to the degree other nations' citizens have, the nationalized oil industry is mismanaged, corrupt, and technologically lackluster.

Mexico is still considered a “semi-rentier” system (that is, partially oil-dependent), and it certainly began oil-financed public-sector programs. Yet, the public sector dependent upon oil monies became “bloated, loss making, and politicized” (Hertog 2010:291) in the 1980s. Privatization of the Mexican petroleum sector has been creeping in for decades. Ancillary sectors of the petroleum industry, especially some downstream processes, such as the petrochemical industries, have been privatized since the 1980s. Upstream (extraction) petroleum processes,

however, remain in the parastatal company's hands. It is important to note, however, that “Pemex is pushing forward with its restructuring processes aimed at reducing its bureaucracy and operational costs and creating a more transparent management” (ibid.) Under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), Mexico sold off large parts of its public sector in the 1990s, turning toward a neoliberal economic practice. Even with this restructuring, Pemex is “perceived as an opaque and inefficient mess in which union bosses wield significant power” (Hertog 2010:291). Despite these changes, whose impetus was undoubtedly the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Mexico still has not joined the International Energy Agency, which requires privatization.

Puyana (2006) outlines external and internal constraints to Mexican energy policy's limits. External factors are: 1) US pressure to adhere to a more integrated energy and oil market within NAFTA; 2) changes in the international petroleum market and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) capacity to expand and contract on demand; 3) US energy policy changes in response to increasing dependency on imported crude. Any type of response to these external restraints will require any number of constitutional changes, from changing Pemex's federal tax responsibilities to drastic constitutional reforms that will permit privatized upstream and downstream processes.

As a parastatal company responsible for a large percentage of the nation's fiscal revenue, Pemex has a dual, and sometimes conflicting, role: to generate revenue and to “[assure] a flow of investment to reproduce and expand its productive capacity” (Puyana 2006:75). Increasing taxation could promote “overexploitation, underinvestment, and the shortening of the life of oil reserves” (ibid.). On the other hand, extending the life of known reserves would require the

government to look to other forms of tax revenue. This is an issue because Mexico, like other petrostates, has undertaxed other sectors of the economy, depending on oil as a revenue mainstay.

The Mexican government is resistant to this change, and options to change engender a political sacrifice that each new Mexican leader is fearful to make. Oil is entangled in nationalistic sentiment, and the incredible dependence Mexico has on oil for fiscal revenue cannot be discounted. Additionally, the powerful Pemex workers union is not at all interested in privatization or other types of drastic reform, and it has mobilized protests against privatization.

The Pemex workers' union, the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Petroleros de la República Mexicana (STPRM), is an important constraint to privatization. Zalik (2006:5) notes that, “[g]enerally the STPRM's power emerged from negotiated control among state managers and the union following the nationalization of 1938, and over time fomented high-level corruption involving leadership in both administrations, Pemex and the STPRM.” The government is dependent on Pemex—and by correlation, STPRM—because oil industry earnings (including taxes and direct payments from PEMEX) are about one-third of Mexico's total government revenues (U.S. Energy Information Association 2014). Moreover, the government is dependent on the union for its ability “to quell discontent and prevent work stoppages” (Zalik 2006:5). The power of the oil union, the STPRM, is beyond the control of the company and is an example of how unions in Mexico have become the third branch of government .

Mexico has both over- and underinvested in the oil sector. It has symbolically overinvested in oil, and the “weight of historical and ideological baggage is too hard to pull” (Brown and Knight 1992:297). The hegemonic growth of the oil industry has left few other options for

development and institutions in the public mindset. Offshore oil exploration and production is weak because of this lack of investment. Offshore is an area of the oil industry that requires heavy investment in technology and know-how, something Pemex has not done. Interestingly, however, private companies are contracted throughout of the Gulf of Mexico, causing Breglia (2013:289) to say, “The Gulf of Mexico, the nation’s most strategically important production region, has...been caught between a de facto privatization and a de jure maintenance of the commons.” Eighty percent of oil extraction in Mexico today is located offshore in Campeche Sound. Two issues with large impact in this area are: reclamations for environmental reform and pressures for economic liberalization. In the 1990s, Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador led protests against neoliberal actions. Lopez Obrador's followers were mainly campesinos who protested the oil industry's environmental irresponsibility and ex-Pemex workers who were laid off after the establishment of neoliberal policies.

### Mexico, the US, and Gulf of Mexico Oil

The United States is highly involved in Mexico's oil industry, from its beginning as early entrepreneurs cut through tropical forests to exploit oozing pools of chapopote to the reaction to nationalization of subsoil minerals in 1938 to creating a greater demand for Mexican oil imports through increased consumption of oil and growing mistrust and fear of other oil providers (in the Middle East and South America). In fact, it seems the United States would prefer to have a greater say in how Mexico negotiates its oil industry, as it continually pushes for greater production and more privatization of the industry. Increasingly, the Mexican nation’s grip on the oil industry, although still quite strong symbolically, is weakening, as old fields are being



depleted more quickly than anticipated and future technologies are proving more and more expensive and unavailable to Mexico, which has not appropriately invested in its own industry.

The United States, since the beginning of the oil boom of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, has been interested in Mexican oil—seeing it as quite possibly abundant and certainly exploitable. Likewise, Mexico’s position toward its fossil fuel resources has historically been tangled up in issues of sovereignty and the need for foreign investment. The early days of oil coincided with Porfirio Díaz’s great attempt to industrialize and modernize Mexico. Díaz’s promotion of economic modernization involved favoring foreign capital, especially from the United States and Great Britain (Shafer and Mabry 1981:68). Mexico was aware of the potential money to be made, but it realized that oil was just one of many resources the nation had that Mexicans could not develop without foreign technical and financial assistance.

American and British capitalists, such as Doheny and Pearson, began oil exploitation in northeastern Mexico, notably in Tampico, Tamaulipas, on the northeast Gulf Coast. Far from the central government’s arm, these foreign concerns were too powerful and sophisticated for the local power elite—poorly trained, unorganized *caudillos* who attempted to “extract benefit from the petroleum industry” (Shafer and Mabry 1981:69). The Mexican Revolution had a paralyzing effect on much of the country’s modernization. Although the oil industry was not spared, it was able to remain viable and became a powerful industry immediately following the revolution. Indeed, one of the oil industrialists’ few protections lay simply in their location—in remote, unsavory areas, namely the Huasteca Veracruzana. Oil production rose, therefore, as a result of the oil fields’ protection—and the advances of the American automotive industry and the fuel-guzzling First World War. Mexico went from producing 12.5 million oil barrels (bbl) in 1911—to

193 bbl in 1921 (ibid.:69,71). This made Mexico the second largest oil producer in the world, after the United States.

Following the Mexican Revolution, the nation adopted a new constitution, which gave the national government control of subsoil minerals, although it ultimately overlooked this amendment in many cases, often to please American interests. How the Mexican government would exploit its fossil fuel resources while being under the thumb of foreign—primarily American—concerns finally came to a head with Lázaro Cárdenas. Cárdenas reformed the constitution to make it more in line with the goals of the revolution. Touted as the preeminent nationalistic move in Mexican history, he nationalized petroleum and created the state oil enterprise *Petróleos Mexicanos* (Pemex) on March 18, 1938.<sup>6</sup> This nationalization, “perhaps the most hallowed historical act in Mexican nationalist mythology” (Williams 1978:80), marked a turn toward national pride and hope for the country’s own development efforts, in many Mexicans’ opinions (Shafer and Mabry 1981). The state company got started and found it difficult to bulk up production. Yet, even that which it produced was boycotted by the United States, a boycott that was only lifted after the onset of World War II (Williams 1978:203)

The role of wars on the US demand for Mexican oil (and Mexican political stability) cannot be discounted. World War I and II, and the subsequent growth in consumption thereafter, increased US demand for Mexican oil. During World War II the United States relied heavily on Mexican oil and labor. It was also important to have a stable and safe southern border while the country was involved in military action in the Pacific and Europe. After World War II, the US recognized its need for ample supplies, especially petroleum, to remain in its position of power. The US pressured Mexico to increase petroleum production and open up to foreign investment,

less than a decade after expropriation (Aguayo Quesada 1998). While the Mexican government was unwilling to do that, the president was willing to privately agree that “in any critical circumstance, the US would have access to Mexican crude” (ibid. 63). Aguayo Quesada (1998) points out that the US needed Mexico to be an ally during the cold war and focused on Mexico maintaining “stability, progress, and friendship.” Throughout the cold war, the US attempted to persuade Mexico not to nationalize more industries—as it had its oil industry. The US hoped to build on strategic interests in Mexico, encouraging Mexico to allow foreign investment in the oil sector.

Officially, Mexico is not a member of OPEC. In the 1970s, the Mexican government entertained the idea that Mexico should join OPEC, but beyond official positions regarding trade agreements, Mexico’s geographical and political position vis-à-vis the United States would make involvement in OPEC very difficult for the industry and for Mexico as a country. Grayson (1981) notes that the Mexican government also must achieve a balance between pleasing Mexican nationalists, who believe joining OPEC would attenuate the US’s hand in Mexican affairs, and those who believe joining any such organization would limit the nation’s independence. Grayson says Mexicans have traditionally been unwilling to 1) take any measure that would reduce Mexico's freedom to act; while at the same time 2) “irritate gratuitously a powerful neighbor that withdrew trade preferences from cartel members for six years after the 1973 embargo” (ibid.:152). By not being involved in OPEC, Mexico is usually able to charge more than OPEC members for oil (ibid.) because its largest importer shares a 2,000-mile border. This proximity to the US allows lower transportation costs compared to Middle East oil.

Puyana (2006) notes that the US also has a hand in Mexican oil politics in its desires to adapt the oil and energy market to integrate it into NAFTA's framework. As the United States' demand for crude oil continues to increase, it attempts to further integrate—to no avail, according to Puyana—these fossil fuels into NAFTA. The Mexican government is not interested, so far, in shifting its position on even bringing petroleum to the negotiation table.

*Mexican Workers throughout the Gulf of Mexico.* Throughout the Gulf of Mexico—on both sides of the border—Mexican migrant workers are employed in the oil industry. Mexican workers with H-2B visas in the US Gulf Coast are chiefly from states that border the Gulf of Mexico. Previous experience is of utmost importance for a successful stint as a guestworker in the Gulf Coast oil industry. They gain experience in the shipbuilding, oil and gas, and energy industries, which has a stronghold in the states of Veracruz, Tamaulipas, Tabasco, and Campeche. Areas such as Laguna Verde or Alta Mira, Tampico, and Ciudad del Carmen in Mexico produce workers with knowledge and experience of specialized welding processes. Workers either enter the craft by family and social ties or by virtue of needing to locate a well-paying job. Not unlike their American counterparts, they may have family members in the industry. Workers make contacts that lead them to work opportunities in Mexico and the United States. Workers from this area of Mexico are known for their skills, many having worked at least indirectly for the national petroleum company, Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex). Thus, the Mexican state, in essence, provides these workers to the American oil industry. Many individuals worked directly or indirectly for Pemex, receiving their initial experience, training, and certifications with the state oil company. The Mexican nation state has invested greatly in these workers who are then imported by the US, joining a workforce in an industry hungry for skilled, experienced workers.

The introduction of the oil industry in the Gulf Coast of Mexico has had transfiguring effects on the geography, landscape, ecology, and environment of the region. That said, as humans and nature are inextricably interwoven in time and space, the effect of the oil industry on the people of the Gulf Coast has likewise been transformative. Prior to the advent of the Mexican oil industry, the Gulf Coast region was characterized by many as a tropical paradise. In fact, in many accounts “Edenic” rhetoric abounds in the descriptions of the Gulf Coast, especially the Huasteca, a region along the Gulf of Mexico including parts of the states of Tamaulipas and Veracruz. Teneek people populated the region during the early days of oil and employed land tenure practices that were not in line with the goals of the modernizing Mexican nation nor oil interests (both foreign and domestic).

Local indigenous people were at first ambivalent about the industry. Some became willfully employed by the industry as guides, showing early explorers where chapopote gurgled out of the land into puddles and ponds. Others refused to sell their lands, and many became victims of traps, schemes, and even murders, by the oil industrialists. Eventually, many of the indigenous campesinos went to work as laborers in the industry, alongside mestizo workers from other areas of Mexico and American and European engineers and management (Santiago 2006).

The change from agriculture to a livelihood more dependent on wage labor profoundly affected women’s lives. Once they were able to feed their families from what they produced on the land. After oil, they suddenly found themselves trapped in a debt-peonage system. The wage-labor system was structured so families could not live from a male wage earner’s pay; women and children had to work in industries and services ancillary to the oil industry.

The early Mexican oil industry was highly racialized. Indigenous workers provided the dirty, dangerous manual labor. Mestizos provided more technical manual labor; and Europeans and Americans were supervisors, engineers, managers, and financiers of the industry at large. This structure continues in the Gulf of Mexico oil industry, even after nationalization. When Mexico expropriated the oil industry in 1938, the departure of Americans and Europeans left a vacuum of skill sets and technology access and knowhow. Even though they have filled this void to a degree, petroleum enclaves in Mexico are increasingly characterized by subcontractors from the United States and Europe. While Pemex is officially in charge of the exploration, extraction, production, and delivery of petroleum, foreign interests are creeping in. Subcontractors hold specialized contracts for installation or repairs and as partial partners for projects. Many subcontractors' hourly contract workers are not local residents and come from poorer areas throughout the Gulf.

As with of any industry, workers follow the industry, as it needs a labor force and becomes a pull for the un- or underemployed. This is the case in the petroleum enclaves of Mexico, starting with Tampico, and spreading throughout the Gulf to places such as Agua Dulce, Poza Rica, and Tuxpan in Veracruz and then later on in the areas around Villahermosa, Tabasco, and the Campeche Sound. Immigrant workers transform the areas they move to, even as they are required to adjust to their new homes and workplaces. Olvera (1992) notes that social cohesion took different forms in these oil towns. Rather than working together in fields and being involved in cycles of celebrations centered on the land, workers were disconnected from aspects of nature not linked to oil extraction. Instead, pool halls, brothels, and bars popped up in these hypermasculine industry-centered complexes.

These venues were in fact the impetus for the first unionization of petroleum workers. If anything is distinctive about Mexican oil, it is the power of the Mexican oil workers' union, the STPRM. The STPRM is often as powerful as the company Pemex and enjoys much power even within the government. To have a *ficha* (membership card) to work for Pemex, which is only given by the union, is to have guaranteed work, and in many cases services that most citizens cannot dream of, such as company hospitals, apartment complexes, and stores. These fichas are primarily inherited from father to son, which creates a strong identification with the union.

It could be said that STPRM, because of its workers' loyalty, has ensured that Mexican oil has remained nationalized to this day. The privatization of oil is a contentious subject that blows up at local and national levels with great frequency, causing heated reactions from both sides. To some, any talk of privatizing the industry is an affront to the sacred position of oil as a symbol of Mexican sovereignty. To others, privatization is perhaps the only road to save a struggling industry that provides a large percentage of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP).

A figure often tied to the issue of the human and environmental impacts of the oil industry is Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO)—2006 presidential candidate, past mayor of Mexico City, leading figure of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD) and activist for indigenous and environmental justice. López Obrador worked for the rights of the indigenous people of his home state, Tabasco, becoming popular because of his involvement in a televised protest. He appeared on camera, bloodied from police confrontations while protesting the environmental injustices suffered by the Chontal people in the area. More recently, he was involved in protests of the energy reform measures in Congress, which he argued was privatization under the guise of “energy reform.” He and his followers

blocked the entrance to both houses of Congress, chaining the doors and blocking them with tables and chairs.

Fortunately, the current environmental effects of the oil industry are nothing like during the 1920s. In those early days, oil would gush out of wells, carbon dioxide precipitation from wells fell like snow, and streams of fire flowed into the Gulf of Mexico. Ships from miles away could see flames rising from accidents. However, as the industry has moved increasingly offshore, it has had a greater impact on the fishing industry.

Regulations now forbid fishing near platforms. In fact, the federal government has begun a program to assist those who have been displaced from their livelihood in the fishing industry because of oil. Called FIFOPESCA (*Fund to Support the Conversion of the Fishery of the Mexican Gulf*), it provides “conversion money” for fisherman to convert their livelihoods, primarily to fish farming. Discussed by Zalik (2009:575), “FIFOPESCA’s key welfare intervention, fish farming, incorporates fishermen into a productivist work ethic and the capitalist labor market, building dependency on an increasingly privatized offshore petroleum industry.” Zalik found that most individuals who are part of the FIFOPESCA program do not like fish farming because it has entirely changed their way of life. Rather than being free and setting out on a boat in the morning, they are now essentially farmers — tied to feeding their fish. In fact, Zalik found that many of these displaced fisherman end up not staying with fish farming but rather took the retirement option or sought employment with Pemex.

Long-practiced fishing practices and the fishing industry as a whole has been co-opted by the petroleum industry. Moreover, by developing land in coastal areas for refineries and on-shore service sector necessities of the industry, it has also drawn an employee base from those



displaced people. As it exploited and displaced the Teneek in the Huasteca, oil companies continue to exploit and displace wherever it finds oil. People are displaced and incorporated into new and foreign livelihoods where they are simply “*mano de obra*” (manual labor).

Yet often it seems that Mexicans hold paradoxical beliefs — as seen in Lopez Obrador’s actions. He protests against the oil industry because it has ruined and contaminated the environment to the detriment of indigenous people, yet he also fights for Mexican nationalized oil. Behind the scene of all these debates and issues is the historical context of the importance of nationalized oil and the distrust of foreign companies. While many public sector companies were privatized in the neoliberal reforms in the last 20 years in Mexico, oil has stayed stronger than any other. Carlos Slim, who bought the newly privatized Mexican telephone company, became the richest man in the world as a result of this purchase. But there will be no one single buyer of Pemex. If it is to be privatized, it will end up being taken apart in bits and pieces — upstream, downstream, production, extraction, and refining. And the oil fields will look like many other places in the world, where transnational companies are the standard.

Divining the future of Mexican oil is a near impossible feat, primarily because of the historical ebb and flow of legislation regarding who owns the rights to the subsurface, which culminated with Cárdenas expropriating the petroleum industry. In a country where the nation-building scheme seems never to end, and *forjando patria* struggles to incorporate *all* people, things that resonate with the masses—as oil—endure. Women, rich and poor alike, flocked to donate their gold and jewelry to pay for the expropriation of oil in 1938. It brought people together in a way that not much else can and at a time when the Mexican government needed to prove that the revolution was not merely in word and blood but also in act and completion.

Yet Mexico is entering a time when change is eminent. Media decry Pemex's technology and announce the decline of the Cantarell Field. Foreign national companies, such as PetroBras, and transnational companies are knocking at the doors, wanting to pursue development in the Gulf of Mexico—where new fields in “ultra-deep” water promise huge profits, if they can balance technology investment with production. Is oil the last shred of Mexico's symbolic sovereignty? Mexico is a nation of emigrants who have left their farms that lost hope of remaining sustainable, overshadowed by American government-subsidized, large-scale industrial farms. Its primary income comes from oil, tourism, and migrants. Although tourism does exploit the natural beauty of many places in Mexico, it does not have the symbolic value for the nation that agriculture or oil does (that said, many resorts are foreign-owned). What is the value, however, of symbolic sovereignty? Even as the government and its citizens proclaim the importance of national oil, Mexico is often at the mercy of other actors, especially the United States. As this debate is played out, it will be important to watch the role of workers. If oil is nationalized, will Pemex workers be displaced? Will even a greater number work on both sides of the Gulf, and under what auspices?

## Chapter 4: When Work is Everything: Labor Casualization in the Gulf Oil Industry

*“l’Homme n’est Rien l’Oeuvre Tout” (The man is nothing, the work is everything).*

Gustave Flaubert, letter to George Sand

Oil workers’ labor in the Gulf of Mexico benefits a globalized industry. Oil platforms and fabrication yards are transnational spaces: foreign and transnational companies and subcontractors abound; workers are permanent resident or citizen engineers, migrant welders working with visas, unauthorized (or illegal) immigrant helpers, and even European (or South American) company executives. Many languages may be spoken in a single yard, ship, rig, or platform: English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Romanian, French, Tagalog. The industry produces petroleum products for a global market. Transnational corporations and transnational labor—each with varying power—are significant actors in the Gulf of Mexico region. Capital moves in and out of the Gulf of Mexico. And although the region is bisected by an international border—which has become increasingly militarized—some workforce segments in the Gulf of Mexico’s oil industry are highly mobile.

Despite working in a region defined by the oil industry, these mobile workers in the Gulf of Mexico find themselves actors in two countries with different histories and politics regarding the oil industry. In the northern region of the Gulf, Houston is a main global oil hub. It stands as a global energy metropolis (Melosi and Pratt 2007) and is home to large private oil companies. The US oil industry is highly regulated and monitored. For migrant Mexicans workers in the US, the most evident of these agencies is the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the agency that mandates and enforces safety equipment and protocol. In the southern region of the Gulf lies Mexico, with its the eroding state-owned oil company and infamous,

strong, yet inefficient oil workers' union, the STPRM. Despite the many differences, oil towns look and feel similar: a disproportionate number of men rotating in and out of work, often in company pick-up trucks and vans emblazoned with names recognizable even in small corners of the globe (Schlumberger, Halliburton, Baker Hughes). With the growing number of subcontractors throughout the Gulf, exploring experiences of migrant Mexican workers in the precarious employment relations on both sides of the border has allowed me to gain a broader, more comprehensive understanding of how workers navigate their precarious relationship livelihoods.

## Uncertainties in the Oil Industry

### **Many-layered Uncertainty**

Transnational organizations and governments may discuss ways to decrease use of fossil fuels, and the “oil majors”<sup>7</sup> may explore options for “green energy,” but for the foreseeable future the world will continue to be dependent on petroleum. Uncertainty confronts workers in the regional Gulf of Mexico oil industry at many levels. Exploiting oil involves multiple uncertainties, along nearly every piece of the energy chain— political, geological, technological, financial, and climatic. From extraction to refinement from demand to future changes in environmental policies, especially those addressing climate change, uncertainties abound (see Krey and Riahi 2013). But workers bear the consequences of such uncertainties and risks, particularly as greater numbers are employed in contingent contractual situations.

An icon of the industry, the wildcat well<sup>8</sup> symbolizes the industry's actions in uncertain environments. Oil companies dauntlessly invest money, energy, and lives to drill into the earth's surface, which may or may not conceal black gold. Uncertainty is endemic in the oil industry,

particularly offshore. Decisions related to petroleum exploration, extraction, and production are complex and difficult to calculate because of the wide-ranging variables involved in the process (Suslick et al. 2009:30). Both upstream and downstream, the numbers, figures, and projections are volatile, given changing developments in technologies, uncertainties in price, supply, and demand calculations. Suslick, Schiozer, and Rodriguez (ibid.) say the hydrocarbons industry is a “high-risk venture”: risk analysts must take into account geological uncertainties, and economic calculations (such as costs, probability of finding reserves, producing from reserves, oil price, technology). “These uncertainties [originate] from geological models and coupled with economic and engineering models involve high-risk decision scenarios, with no guarantee of successfully discovering and developing hydrocarbons resources” (ibid.). While the rewards are great, so are the risks.

Oil majors, which consistently own a majority of the top-10 spots on the global Fortune 500 list, invest vast amounts of money in analyses and technology to decrease losses associated with risky ventures. Decisions are made after employing risk analyses, yet uncertainty remains and day-to-day activities in the field have been modified to minimize and maximize profits. This chapter follows how historical changes in capital and the oil industry’s many uncertainties filter down to the individual worker.

### Precarious Economics

Widespread security has not been the organizational norm through all of history (Neilson and Rossiter 2008:54), yet the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a change. Those who entered the workforce in the years following World War II, during Fordism’s heyday decades, reaped the rewards of secure work positions, pay, and benefits. Individuals were often loyal life-long

employees of one company. Yet this security was confined primarily to the United States and Western Europe (Ettlinger 2007:322). This era of Fordism was characterized by increased production made possible by industrial change that favored routinization and intensification. The goal of these measures was to have

citizens in full-time employment, who had expectations of rising living standards and job security, while the main recipes were workforce participation, free collective bargaining, strong trade unions, government intervention and Keynesian macro-policies (Beck 2000:69).

While this period often refers to Ford's factory, with its assembly lines and specialized tasks, workers also benefitted from the projects of the New Deal in the United States and other protections such as trade unionism (Kalleberg 2009).

During this time the oil industry in the Gulf of Mexico began to move from land to water and further from the shores, bayous, and marshes of Texas and Louisiana. The ecology shaped labor relations, as individuals and families complemented traditional livelihoods of fishing, hunting, and agriculture with sporadic work in oil. Increasingly, companies began to promote identities connected with oil. McGuire and Gardener (2003:225) believe this industrial strategy helped maintain a store of laborers in the oilpatch:

In spite of the ebb and flow of the global political economy—inevitably resulting in periodic layoffs in the oilpatch—companies were able to maintain legions of roughnecks, roustabouts, and multiple other tradesmen on hold during periods of financial retrenchment. Laborers clung to the notion that the companies would eventually take care of them by putting them back to work, for they always had. These workers, warm-stacked like the rigs on which they work, represented a key factor in the political ecology of oil extraction.

## **Post-Fordism**

Comaroff and Comaroff (2000:302) claim that several conditions created an environment that prompted a change from Fordism to a situation in which individuals are expected to cope

without the security provided by the corporation or state. A worldwide process of deterritorialization and transnationalization is characterized by several issues. First, the undermining of states' capacities to sustain economies based on nationalized production makes negotiating wages and work conditions within a defined national territory obsolete. Labor costs in industrialized nations are cut by casualized work, outsourcing, and the hiring of a malleable workforce. Workers are obliged to live with minimal protections against exploitation.

The restructuring of workplace practices from regular, permanent contracts to short-term, temporary, or casual contracts is a strategy for company cost reduction. This so-called casualization of work is not steady or sustainable for the worker but results in higher profit for the company. Casual workers inhabit a precarious position in the workplace, labor market, and society.

Just-in-time production, flexible labor, and outsourcing define post-Fordism (Harvey 2007). Companies have moved to more occasional workers and increased technology—strategies that respond quickly to market shifts, essentially increasing adaptability to meet changing needs (Hoffman 2011:42). Casualized or informalized labor (Ettlinger 2007) came about as capital moved to a “new economy” of information, global networks, and ever-more flexible work structures (Gregory 2013). Workers in these precarious situations fill a contingent labor need: their skills, energy, and knowledge are needed by a company but the conditions of that need are likely to be “immediately and directly contingent on changes in production processes and fluctuations in product and service demand” (Gleason 2006:31).

The oil industry in the Gulf of Mexico grew rapidly during the 1960s and 1970s: “the influx of workers was high, relationships between companies and workers became more complicated,

affected by the complexity of the industry, its differential effects on people's lives and the communities in the area, and the fact that by then neither the industry nor the communities were isolated from external economic and social trends" (Austin et al. 2006:92). Following recessions in the 1980s, the 1990s were volatile in the oil industry, with a drastic price decrease in crude oil. Mimicking other corporate restructuring, the oil industry reorganized through a series of mergers and basic changes in the conditions under which people were employed (ibid.:98). The 1990s "dashed hopes and strained the strategies that companies, family, and communities had developed for coping with an uncertain economy" (ibid.:92). Restructuring led to a host of layoffs and cuts in hours and pay. Company profits increased. In contrast to the past when oil companies also suffered during lean times, restructuring created a gulf between company profits and workers' earnings.

### **Precarity, Capitalism, and Gulf Oil**

Favoring profit over worker security and transferring from companies to individual workers the responsibility for carrying the load of risk and uncertainty, are the hallmarks of post-Fordist oil in the Gulf of Mexico. While Mexican oil has taken a different path than the privatized US model, Pemex's strong nationalized model has proven inadequate, and for decades contracting companies have operated in Mexican oilfields. Post-Fordist changes are chipping away at the Pemex monolith. Foreign and transnational oil service contracting companies operate throughout the Gulf of Mexico. And even in Mexico, with nationalized oil and a formidable union, these companies place profit before all.

*Restructuring, the Industry's Experience.* Until the 1970s, oil was vertically integrated—a strategy that harkens back to John D. Rockefeller's monopoly, Standard Oil. The majors attempted to



operate at each level of production and keep employees on their own payrolls (Austin et al. 2006:101). In the 1990s, however, companies began to move their primary interests, and thus their capital and people, away from the Gulf of Mexico. Companies moved to other regions of the world where more money was to be made from oil and regulation was lax. Production took a back seat to stockholders' and banking interests. Yet, there was still oil in the Gulf; independent oil companies and subcontractors filled the void the majors left when they moved their strategic interests elsewhere (ibid.).

The use of subcontractors continues to dominate the oil industry. A single company no longer performs every aspect of petroleum extraction and production. From seismic studies to the fabrication of platforms to drilling and refining, most oil workers today are employees of subcontractors rather than the majors. Subcontractors themselves even subcontract for some processes, such as engineering, design, and food services.

The contracting of contingent workers allows the development of a strategic response to deal with an "increasingly global and dynamic economic environment" (Gleason 2006:31). This strategy reduces labor costs (especially during lean times) by using just-in-time work constellations, hiring, laying off, or reassigning workers to respond to demand fluctuations, and subcontracting for extraordinary projects, especially those for which a special skill or expertise is needed for a finite period of time.

Generally, companies have benefited from having a small workforce on their payrolls and contracting labor as needed. The flexibility to control the size of their workforce to fit the demand of a job has decreased operating costs and thus increased profits. Diane Austin and her colleagues (2006:101) report talking with a lead operator in Louisiana who explained that this

system, “makes it easy for managers to treat individual workers like rented tools that can be easily returned if and when necessary. ‘We had a surplus of contract workers, and we got rid of them, and just moved everybody down a notch or two. But my company has not had to fire anyone, yet.’”

*Profit over Security.* Ross (2008:45) claims that precarity is an “exercise of capitalist control.”

Post-Fordist capitalism profits by fragmenting and disorganizing employment and socioeconomic life. It creates a workforce that is vulnerable, unstable, and desperate. No longer loyal to the provider of security, a regular paycheck, or the pat on the back at the company picnic from the boss who gave your father his first job, workers today expect to have a linear job or life narrative, as one laid-off worker described to McGuire (2003:225),

[a large fabrication yard] has been a good employer, but times have changed, the economy has changed...company philosophy has definitely changed. The job security is gone. People, including myself, used to think that they would start with one of these big companies and eventually retire. That’s not the case today. People expect to have multiple careers in their lifetime. I put my heart and soul into that job, into that company, but we are just going to have to look somewhere else. I’ve got to get over the insecure feeling that I’ve got now from literally being kicked out the door that morning. There was no warning.

Although the industry is defined by its cycles and responses to price and demand changes, federal, state, and even transnational policies, today the industry “offers little guarantee of employment, difficult terms of advancement, and, in general, an uncertain future” (Austin et al. 2006:89).

*Risk from Companies to Individuals.* Individual workers now shoulder the uncertainties once borne by companies. Employees assume the risks of employment: they must come to the job with the necessary training and be responsible for the costs of their health care, retirement, and accident insurance (in the case of independent welders); they must strategically assemble

networks to learn about employment and industrial information, and like entrepreneurs, search for opportunities and chances to move along when a job ends.

This comes at a time when the welfare state has contracted, providing less amelioration for citizens: it attempts to transfer to the private sector the responsibility for maintaining a suitable standard of living for its citizens (Beck 1992; Spyridakis 2013:1-2). Corporations are simultaneously shifting economic risks to their workers, offering little security (Horning 2012). The precarious worker, free from (or denied) state-funded securities such as health care and a secure retirement, now witnesses the breakdown of the once presumed contract between employer and employee (Benería 2001). Opportunities for stable, lifelong, or long-term jobs and security are no more (Gregory 2013).

Workers absorb costs, financial risks, and liability for the oil industry's restructuring and use of contractors. One phrase heard over and over again from company officials is "time is money." By using subcontractors and contract labor rather than full-time company employees, companies have become more agile. Reducing downtime saves money, and reducing employees improves profits. Austin notes that, "One of the most effective means to accomplish this is to have people standing by to respond to breakdowns, supply shortages, and emergencies. However, labor costs can drive up prices and therefore have come under close scrutiny. These costs can be reduced by shifting the burden of staying prepared onto the workers" (Austin et al. 2006:105). Workers absorb the costs of waiting: waiting in on-call arrangements or waiting to be called for a short-term project contract. Financial risk is also transferred to individual workers: some companies required welders I interviewed to provide their own tool buckets and tools, which cost upwards of \$250. Independent workers (such as welders) must also carry large insurance policies. All

these costs can be ultimately understood as the costs of operating in a highly volatile industry, marked by booms, busts, and erratic, difficult-to-predict cycles. The greater reliance on contractors allowed companies to diminish losses during low times, with a dire consequence: “the penalty of the low and rapidly fluctuating oil prices was borne by people outside the major oil companies” (ibid.:107).

Earlier, workers understood the volatility of the industry, but as they began to realize that companies were reporting large profits even during times of low oil prices, worker loyalty began to erode. To persevere in the oil industry’s extended recession of the 1980s, companies moved to a reliance on contracted, contingent labor. This came with consequences local workers could see in their bank accounts and at the dinner table. “From the perspective of the families and communities of southern Louisiana, the shift meant an increase in the insecurity of an already insecure job market and dealt perhaps the final blow to the loyalty maintained toward employers by the local population” (Austin et al. 2006:118). Local workers began to seek work elsewhere, and companies began to locate new sources of labor from other regions and even other parts of the world.

### The H-2B Visa, Its Uses and Manifestations

Although they represent a fraction of the total migrant labor in the industry at large, a considerable portion of the migrant workers in the oil and oil-related industries during my fieldwork were working with an H-2B visa—a temporary nonagricultural labor visa. During 2008 fieldwork in Texas, these visas were available to those with in-demand skill sets, social networks that promoted knowledge of the system, capital to buy a visa, and the means to travel or be away from home as necessary. Companies may deem it necessary to use H-2B workers when

completing a project that involves a specific technical skill, such as an infrequently used welding process for which few domestic employees are available.

While foreigners have worked throughout the Gulf for years, H-2B visa holders were contracted in increasing numbers, markedly since the hurricanes of 2005 and until the economic recession of 2008. While the H-2B visa is not a perfect solution to labor shortages in the Gulf or poverty abroad, these guestworkers, for the most part, use their skills, work ethic, and networks to get by in an uncertain industry in uncertain times. Moreover, the use of the H-2B visa is an example of how companies are able to receive flexible labor from a global pool and pass on economic and social costs to individual workers.

*History of Guestworkers.* In the 1800s and early-1900s US employers began using international labor contractors and guestworkers in agriculture. This continued and was expanded during World War II to include laborers in the railroad and mining sectors. The Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) of 1952 created the H-type visa, the primary guestworker or nonimmigrant labor visa category in the US. The H-2 category at first was primarily used by agricultural employers but has expanded, continuing to be “reinvented and reinterpreted with different drafts of immigration and labor market policy” (Griffith 2006:37).

Along the Gulf Coast, the use of H-2B visa labor has been common among sugar and seafood processors, forest products companies, and casino and tourist industries since the program’s inception, but it was not until late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the H-2B visa was used in fabrication and shipbuilding.

*Rules and Stipulations of the H-2B.* Department of Labor certification of companies to hire H-2B guestworkers attempts to assure that foreign workers do not take jobs away from US citizens and

residents. To obtain Department of Labor certification to employ foreign workers, employers must prove they have a temporary, one-time, peakload, intermittent, or seasonal need. They must do this by proving they have advertised for the position or positions and no able, qualified, and available American workers (or permanent residents) are available to fill the position. Employers must pay the prevailing wage rate—but not the adverse effect wage rate—so the wages and working conditions of workers in the United States similarly employed will not be “adversely affected” by companies importing guestworkers. Unlike the H-2A visa, H-2B employers are not required to pay for housing or transportation.

The stipulations of the H-2B visa establish control over the individuals. Guestworkers with an H-2B visa can only work for the company that hired them; visa holders are bound to the employer. If H-2B visa holders leave their contracting employer, they are no longer authorized to work in the United States, and if they do so, it is illegal. Work authorization is for up to one year, although it may be extended, but not for more than three consecutive years.

*Criticism of the H-2B.* The H-2B program has been the subject of criticism recently. Special-interest group publications (see Bauer 2008) and attempted legislative changes (see Bruno 2008) testify to flaws in the H-2B system. Many employers claim they would prefer not to use the H-2B program. An imbalance of power and control is manifested in diminished worker rights. The use of labor recruiters and often flagrant worker abuses are principle criticisms of how the H-2B program operates currently.

In Ingleside there were four categories of employers who used H-2B visa labor: labor contractors certified to use the H-2B; labor contractors who did not understand the visa process but hoped to; companies who used contractors with H-2B employees; and companies that

contracted H-2B workers directly. Generally, all employers claimed that the regulations of the H-2B program are cumbersome and the process is burdensome and slow (see Wedemeyer 2006). After the 2005 hurricane season, workforce demand prompted some companies to fill positions with H-2B workers, either solicited directly or through labor contractors. All companies, however, noted that hiring foreign workers through the H-2B program did not make economic sense—it did not save them money. Additionally, employers see program regulations as cumbersome.

Beyond cumbersome, however, the regulations of the H-2B program create an imbalance of power and control between workers and their employers. Because workers are by regulation bound to the employer that hires them, if the employer decides to fire an H-2B worker, the employee suddenly has no authorization to be in the US. Just being without a job violates the conditions of the guestworker visa (Bacon 2004). The fear of deportation disciplines H-2B workers, keeping them malleable and compliant, even in light of exploitation. This underscores every interaction between H-2B employees and employers. The possibility of ruining a legal work opportunity in the US by reporting an injustice or problem at work remains at the forefront of many H-2B workers' minds. Another mechanism that employers use to control workers is to collect passports and other documents, such as Social Security cards upon arrival in the US. Employers have claimed that this is for safekeeping. But it also ensures certain workers will not, indeed cannot safely, leave.

This power imbalance results in worker exploitation and the erosion of worker rights. Although employers are required to pay the prevailing wage rate, some inflate wages to satisfy the Department of Labor, but then recuperate that money by charging workers for tools,

transportation, and housing (Austin 2014:110). The H-2B welders I knew in Ingleside were required to purchase a tool bucket, an investment of around \$250, before they could start working. The majority of visa workers in 2008 lived in area apartments. When they returned to Ingleside in following years, however, many lived in and paid for housing set aside by the company. Changes in Texas laws after 2008 denied guestworkers the opportunity to obtain state driver's licenses. Workers were, therefore, essentially compelled to pay \$50 a week, an excessive sum according to several informants, for transportation to and from work. Work sites and fabrication yards are located along the water and far from housing and shopping areas. These changes in availability of independent housing or transportation increased control over employees.

This increased control over workers was expressed by a yard supervisor who explained that because the company sponsors the guestworkers, they are the company's responsibility. Therefore, ensuring they do not get drunk and kill someone in a highway accident, for example, is important for the company. "We want to keep them under our eye as much as we can. We try to keep them as close as we [can] so they don't go out on their own and cause trouble" (Interview, Galiano, La., July 26, 2007).

Central to many of the problems with the H-2B program is employers' reliance on in-country labor recruiters. Although an employer may have the most upright intentions, labor recruiters are infamous for deceiving prospective workers. The problem with recruiters is they are rarely regulated; and oversight is virtually nonexistent (Griffith 2013:227), especially bilateral oversight, e.g., from both Mexican and US governments. Recruiters, or *enganchadores* (persons who figuratively hook someone into a contract) operate complex networks within Mexico and



often charge very high fees, averaging between \$1,000 and \$2,000 during fieldwork. Workers who are not able to pay this upfront may enter something akin to debt bondage with recruiters as they start their H-2B employment. Additionally, some enganchadores hook individuals from economically deprived areas of Mexico with promises of high wages and many hours of overtime. But the terms of employment rarely are as promised. Several H-2B workers, including Alonso, were promised nearly \$2,000 weekly income, only to receive a mere third of that. These unscrupulous labor recruiters' practices make workers vulnerable to employers' abuses: they cannot repay debt with low pay, but they cannot leave job for a better paying job.

An overarching experience of the H-2B workers I interviewed was that employers and the communities they lived in treated them as common laborers, migrant labor. Welders perceived themselves as skilled professionals—welders, not migrants.

*H-2B Legislation.* Many problems in the guestworker program in general, and the H-2B program specifically, are well known within by policy makers and worker advocates. Although “ripe” for immigration reform (Griffith 2007), the US has not successfully passed any legislative measures to attempt to solve the ailing system. The several legislative initiatives that have come before Congress address how guestworkers' wages are determined, issues of housing, guestworkers' access to legal counsel and the courts, and other protections. These pieces of legislation were not informed by research, which would have pointed to a broken guestworker system that has devolved (since the last immigration reform in 1986) into extremely exploitative labor contracting practices.

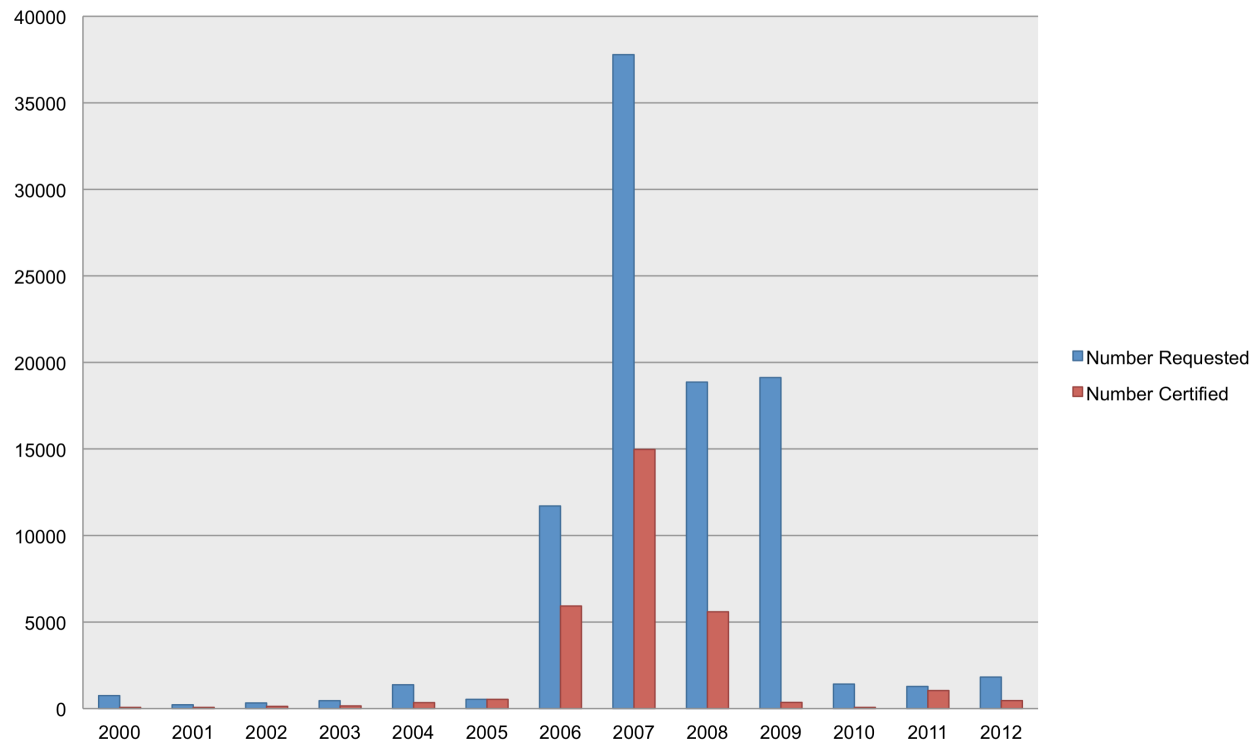
The one piece of legislation that did affect H-2B workers was the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Tsunami Relief. This lifted the

cap of 33,000 every six-months on returning workers. Returning workers, known as H-2R workers, did not count against the cap, allowing the importation of many more non-agricultural temporary migrant workers. This exemption was extended in 2007 but expired that same fall (Austin 2014). Although numerous pieces of legislation have been proposed, especially since the publication of the Southern Poverty Law Center's widely publicized "Close to Slavery: Guestworker Programs in the United States" (Bauer 2008), none have passed.

*Employers' Decision to Use H-2B Visa.* The decision to use H-2B workers was problematic for many employers. Nearly all said the H-2B process does not save money. "It's not economically a smart thing to do," a Human Resources director told me, "because we pay them the same; we train them the same; we treat them the same. From an economic standpoint, we're not saving any money" (Interview, Brownsville, Tex., June 10, 2008). The process is complicated, even with specialized lawyers, trusted in-country recruiters, and agents. Many employers were reluctant to hire foreign workers because of long-standing community ties. A South Texas labor contractor told me: "There are plenty of residents, citizens available right now. We haven't tried to go into visas, it's too . . . I don't know . . . too complicated. All those procedures and things. We haven't tried. We've been doing good with the guys, the residents and everything. There's a lot of contractors who go in for visas, they bring Indian guys" (Interview, Ingleside, April 11, 2008). Many employers, however, argued that importing foreign labor was the only mechanism available to keep them afloat. "Hiring is just different now. And it's not just in the craft positions. But in craft, they're just not making them anymore. We don't want to bring in H-2B visa Mexicans; we want everyone to be from there. But it's just not possible" (Interview, Portland, Tex., May 13, 2008).

*H-2B-Company Setups.* Companies use two setups to employ H-2B workers. Some companies, like Kiewit in Ingleside, go through the visa process themselves and hire foreign workers directly. Most still use an in-country recruiter and agent; Kiewit, claimed to use an agent knowledgeable about the labor laws of Mexico and how to deal with rules and regulations (Interview, Ingleside, May 15, 2008). While it may appear positive to employ labor agents who are knowledgeable of the system, it does not ensure they will follow those regulations, nor does it ensure that those regulations were written with the workers' best interests in mind. The second setup is to draw on labor contractors in the US who have been certified by the Department of Labor to hire and employ H-2B workers. This second setup further distances employers from responsibility for unlawful practices, liability of accidents, workmen's compensation insurance, and drug testing. This practice of labor contractors becoming certified to employ foreign workers makes little sense. They must prove a shortage of US workers for position to be certified, which is difficult to comprehend that since labor contractors have no actual jobs.

*The H-2B Bubble Bursts.* As Figure 1 shows, the rapid increase in foreign worker demand – starting around 2005–followed by an abrupt decrease in certifications, followed by a drop in requests. The H-2B bubble burst in the Gulf of Mexico shipbuilding and fabrication industry. The economic downturn affected the importation of foreign workers. Although the employment situation in the Gulf Coast was not awful, an increase in unemployment rates in other regions added to the pool of available workers. By 2010, employers were laying off workers, and H-2B workers were the first to go (Austin 2014)



**Figure 1: Department of Labor certifications for H-2B visas in the Gulf Coast fabrication industry.**  
**Source: Foreign Labor Certification Data Center Online Wage Library, <http://www.flcdatcenter.com>**

Guestworkers are a prime example of how workers bear the risk companies once shouldered. Companies develop a strategy of dodging costly risks. The H-2B visa, especially from 2006 to 2008, was used by companies to quickly fill a severe workforce demand quickly and cheaply. Rather than companies struggling during difficult times, they import individuals who subsequently experience uncertainties.

## Chapter 5: Experiences of Uncertainty

*We are plagued by the fragility of the presentness which calls for a firm foundation where none exists...when contemplating change, we are always torn between desire and fear, between anticipation and uncertainty.*

Alberto Melucci, *The Playing Self*

“Daniel” seemed to pop up in the Ciudad del Carmen city center when I least expected. In the park charging his mobile from a knot of cords attached to a tree: “I’m waiting for a call from Oceanografía to find out what’s happened with my contract and why we were sent back to shore.” Crossing the street when I was going the other way: “I give up on Oceanografía, they’re not worth the trouble. I’m off with these guys to a cybercafé: they’re going to help me create some experience on Photoshop.” He was everywhere. And going nowhere. Bedecked in reflective sunglasses, a synthetic t-shirt, and a smart phone with just enough credit to get through the day (or more if he found free Wi-Fi), Daniel was determined not to be worn down by his recent circumstances, which were dire.

When I met him, Daniel was 25 years old. The oldest child from his mother’s first marriage, Daniel and his step-father didn’t get along, especially when the arguments between his parents got violent and Daniel physically intervened. Growing up in Agua Dulce, Veracruz, a petroleum town in southern Veracruz known as an STPRM stronghold, he started his foray into the petroleum industry as one is made to believe is the “right” way. He went to school; he studied industrial safety; he got good grades; he had an internship with Pemex. When money became tight as his siblings and halfsiblings became teenagers, he decided to finish his coursework without getting his actual *titulo* (engineering title). He got a short-term contract job in Ciudad del

Carmen with a contracting company, just to get his foot in the door and get himself out of the house.

When I first met Daniel he had seven *subidas* (offshore stints) under his belt, but his contract was suddenly cut short without explanation. He suddenly found himself without a job, just as he was becoming accustomed to the offshore schedule and the relatively stable paycheck from Oceanografia . Throughout the months I knew him, he was continually looking for work and just getting by. Sleeping on the floor at his uncle's apartment. Walking to and from home and companies' HR offices when he didn't have the fare for a bus. He was driven to call on friends to repay once-forgotten loans. Each new application process was accompanied by a new manifestation of petty corruption. One supervisor would be able to get him the documents to prove he had taken the necessary courses—for 6,000 pesos. Another supervisor would hire him with the agreement he would give him 2,000 pesos from each paycheck. Daniel hadn't worked in months: was he a worker? He hadn't been able to finish or afford the final paperwork to complete his degree: was he educated? It was August and he hadn't seen his girlfriend in Veracruz since April: was he in a relationship, *really*?

When I would begin to show signs of pitying him, Daniel was quick to remind me he was not to be pitied. Pointing with his chin and a nod of his head, he showed me groups of men, young to middle-aged, who were just like him, or quite possibly worse off. In one of the most dangerous areas of the island after dark, men waiting for contracts slept on the concrete park benches, ate tuna straight from the can, and nurtured social networks—physically present buddies, family members, and co-workers, and others just a few clicks away.

Day after day, Daniel's story remained the same. Every week he heard of a new job prospect that required distinct qualifications, paperwork, and recommendations. Pushing forward and always optimistic, he acquired the paperwork and signatures he needed, made the calls, and waited. Only to have things fall through. He would then start over again. McAllister (1998:221) likens the precarious experiences of workers like Daniel to Sisyphus's eternal struggle to push a boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll down overnight:

each of these workers struggles up from the bottom rung of the ladder of employment each day only to wake up at the bottom again. Their daily efforts are erased overnight so that each day's labor has been, and will likely continue to be, no more rewarding or secure than the day before.

The future for precarious workers and their families is uncertain. For those who can remember it, the past provided a greater sense of security. The industry provided an identity and a role in society. But people don't know who they are any longer. These workers' position in deregulated employment relations is liminal, much like Spyridakis's (2013) subjects in Greek shipbuilding, whom he described as being in limbo, "a durable betwixt and between process in which they do not really seem to belong anywhere" (ibid. :17).

Without question, employment uncertainty has become generalized and expected, although certainly not hoped for (Smith 2001). Even while living out a constant process of uncertainty, "in a back-and-forth context of transition from full employment to unemployment and to several forms of reemployment, where occupation identity is incessantly reformed and changed" (Spyridakis 2013:16). Individuals are expected to be nimble, ready for spontaneous change, prepared to take risks (Sennett 1998:9).

## Labor Casualization

Sennett (2006) claims that labor force casualization is more than the mere preference to use subcontractors and other types of temporary employees. The entire internal structure of companies changes. “Employees can be held to three- or six-month contracts, often renewed over the course of years; the employer can thereby avoid paying them benefits like health care or pensions. More, workers on short contracts can be easily moved from task to task, the contracts altered to suit the changing activities of the firm. And the firm can contract and expand quickly, shedding or adding personnel” (Sennett 2006:48-49). Oil workers know theirs is not a privileged position. Quickly hired and quickly fired, workers essentially are rented, used for a time and when their usefulness runs out, they’re tossed aside. These casual workers, bodies rented to perform only the task at hand, allow companies to increase their profit margins.

“In this game,” Daniel told me, “the one who wins, the one who earns the most is the company owner and his lackeys; workers only get their salary, and that’s minimal compared to the contract amount” (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, Aug. 15, 2012). He continued to recount—with knowledge and understanding of the industrial situation I didn’t expect—that oil companies themselves, such as Pemex in Mexico, cannot beat using contract workers: “For Pemex it’s cheaper to contract a company to do a job than pay Pemex workers. So now they have very few craft labor or helper workers. Now there are hardly any welders: subcontract companies do everything” (ibid.).

## Implications for Workers

In total, Pemex conducts its operations with 102,000 employees and at least 70,000 subcontracted employees, reflecting the enormous degree to which subcontracting companies



have penetrated the national oil company (Ríos 2007). STPRM claims that according to its data, private companies have supplied 40 percent of the total personnel in the petroleum industry in Mexico (ibid.). Offshore operations use even more subcontractors because of the many specialized tasks and investment required in equipment and knowledge (something Pemex is increasingly unable to manage). Of the 18,000 offshore workers in Mexico, 14,000 work for private subcontracting companies. In Ciudad del Carmen alone, where most of Mexico's offshore operations are based, these 14,000 contract workers, primarily from Tabasco, Veracruz, Chiapas, and Tamaulipas, and work for some 200 companies that contract with Pemex (Chim 2007).

Such is the case for workers in the oil industry throughout the Gulf of Mexico. Individuals are drawn to offshore work because the pay is relatively good compared to what one can earn in livelihoods such as agriculture or fishing. Yet the real work for many is actually getting hired and then staying employed for as long as possible. Like the workers Spryidakis (2013:16) studied, these in the Gulf of Mexico “find themselves in an endless, repetitive struggle to be readmitted into the active workforce, by manipulating the very sensitive local social networks where subcontractors have the final word regarding employment...their career has become discontinuous, with long unemployment intervals and almost no social security protection.” These workers experience unannounced, unexpected layoffs, serial contingent labor, company tactics to hornswoggle workers, and various other abuses.

*Layoffs.* Workers I interviewed both in the US and Mexico regarded layoffs as normal. Those working in Mexico assumed they would be laid off before they chose to leave. I met “José” and “Pablo” when they were both attempting to understand their work situation. They had both

recently worked for Cotemar, an offshore service company, but for several weeks their names were not on the list of employees to go offshore. Each day I saw the two coworkers in the main plaza, finding respite, a few laughs with others in similar situations, and a bit of shade under the trees. They were both living at the Cotemar “hotel”, where they were given food and a bunk to sleep in. Yet as long as they were not working offshore, they were not paid. At first they were certain they would be on the list imminently, but they soon began looking for other jobs because they continued to be excluded from the offshore list. Human Resources failed to give them a straight answer when asked whether they were still employed with Cotemar.

José, a 33-year-old from Tabasco, who in 2010 made his permanent home in Isla Aguada, near Ciudad del Carmen, explained why he left this last job as a *maniobrista*: “Same as always, they lay people off. The contract somehow ends although the work is not finished, workers get laid off, and nobody gets seniority. Nope, in these companies nobody acquires seniority” (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, April 11, 2012). José, like others, has come to believe that short-term contract jobs are his only option. Likewise, Pablo told me the circumstances of his most recent layoff: “They eliminated my position—a reduction order from above, according to my supervisors. That’s when they gave me my *finiquito* (severance or settlement). The contract says that your time is...well, it’s not an established period of time, but rather by project or work order and if the work order is finished, your job is finished” (Ciudad del Carmen, July 14, 2012). For the length of my fieldwork in Ciudad del Carmen, Pablo looked for work—while his wife in Veracruz, weary of being the wife of an unemployed migrant oil worker, asked him to return home where he had a teaching *puesto* (position) in his name (teaching positions in Mexico, like

positions with Pemex, are protected by their strong union, can be kept while holding other jobs, loaned, sold, or given in inheritance).

Sennett (1998:22,24) says “long term” is no longer a characteristic of one’s work life. This corrodes trust, loyalty and mutual commitment between company and employee. The experiences of “Alonso,” the H-2B worker I first met welding in Ingleside, Texas, corroborate Sennett’s point. Alonso felt that toward the end of any project, companies were always looking for reasons to lay off or fire workers. By April 2008, he had been working at Gulf Marine for four months. Gulf Marine normally ran two projects at a time, one in the north yard and one in the south. Alonso noticed that some welders had been transferred to the south yard as the project in the north yard neared completion. But he had also developed heedless habits. Having gained the approval of his immediate supervisors for his excellent welding skills and gregarious manner, Alonso began to feel less and less inclined to be the ideal worker when not under a supervisor’s watchful gaze. He smuggled his cellular phone onto the worksite and made phone calls. He and a coworker would take turns taking naps inside large pipes. These liberties were overlooked. Then one day as the project on the south yard was nearing an end, he pressed his luck too far. As he was hurrying to lunch—and texting a friend—Alonso didn’t put away the gas hoses he was responsible for. He was let go—three months before his visa expired. Others met similar fates as the project neared completion.

Another shipyard worker in the US experienced something similar.

I noticed supervisors, who you could tell apart by their white hats, making their way around to various people on the yard. They would speak to each person they stopped next to for a little while and then take off their white hat. Most of the guys would then either just stand around for a second or then leave. I realized that the company was probably laying off a number of people and I thought, “that sucks for them.” Then around 12 or 1:00pm, a supervisor in a white hat had

walked up to me just as I was finishing welding a piece, and I thought, “Oh shit,” and then he told me that they had to let me go. I don’t understand why they have to constantly lay so many people off. (Interview, Moss Point, Mississippi, July 23, 2008).

Each of these workers, and others, were straight forward in recounting lay offs. Unlike the surprise felt by someone who has worked for a single company for 20 years and then is laid off, contracted workers in the oil industry expect to be relieved of their position eventually, and, in fact, some pursue this type of work because it does not entail long-term commitment.

Some workers, on the other hand, hold false expectations of job longevity. Younger individuals, those who enter the oil industry workforce because of inadequate salaries in other industries, or even those who have worked for years in the oil industry but retain an obsolete understanding of the work culture often expect to keep a job for a long, secure future:

In the platform where I was, I worked all that time, and they told me they would keep me longer. Then they started cutting workforce, and it happened to me. And others stayed working. Oh well, I did work for a good while there, but I thought it would be longer (Fieldnotes, Ciudad del Carmen, April 5, 2012)

Another, surprised and disappointed he had been laid off, lamented: “I felt like things were going well; I hadn’t had a single problem.” Some individuals newer to the industry and those who refuse or cannot “retrofit”—an oft-used phrase in the industry—have expectations of long-term jobs. Likewise, they do not as readily understand the subcontracting culture in the oil industry, in which the norm is positions of finite, often short, periods.

Projects, contracts, companies may differ but the workforce pool is the same. Workers can be laid off from a position one day and rehired soon afterward by another company. “Sometimes the contracts just end and other companies get the contract to continue the work, and well, workers have to keep on looking for a position,” a veracruzano looking for maniobrista work in Ciudad del Carmen told me. The very same workers may—after paperwork, signatures, and time off the

pay books—continue on the same project. They merely have a different *credencial* (a company's official work badge). This is yet another way that risk is borne by individual workers rather than companies. Each time an individual must move from one job to another, energy and no little amount of idle, nonproductive time, is spent. Additionally, each time workers change companies, paperwork delays may hamper timely receipt of paychecks.

One consequence of recurrent layoffs is the absence of company loyalty. And although the casualization of work is calculated by industry analysts, workers create a space to assert themselves.

This was real funny when it happened - this guy was a pipefitter, and they were supposed to have the job finished by Friday. And they weren't going to have it finished by Friday. So the foremen were coming around and saying y'all are going to have to work this weekend because this job is not finished, you'll have to work Saturday and Sunday. This guy says, "Whaddya mean I've got to work Saturday and Sunday? You were going to lay me off today anyway: I'm not going to work Saturday and Sunday so you can lay me off on Monday. I will not be here tomorrow...." Where the [company officials] would never think about this, they have to lie and play sick if they want that day off on the weekend. (Interview, Orange, Tex., April 15, 2008)

Rather than lose a weekend with family or friends, only to return the following week to be laid off, this worker showed that he understood the system and his place in it enough to make it work for him. At least to gain a weekend to do as he pleased. Unlike company employees who by virtue of their position are expected to be loyal, contractors see—and are given—little reason to support company goals.

According to workers, many company officials and yard supervisors maintain an “us” versus “them” attitude toward company employees and those subcontracted for a finite period of time. In interviews, however, company officials and supervisors deny this and claim that everyone is the same in the yard or on the platform. Because they attempt keep a lean workforce within their

own ranks, companies are able to advertise low turnover, an impressive number of days without reportable injuries, and exceptional benefits for their employees. The use of subcontractors and labor contractors lowers the responsibility of the company toward the individual worker and diminishes financial risk for the company. A labor contractor in Mississippi explained why they are often used in the industry:

We have agreements with certain companies and sub-contractors. If they need someone on a site they'll call us and say, "We need a couple contractors" or "We need someone to clean our trailers." "We need so and so on this day or these couple weeks." Like I said, I go around soliciting different companies and if they haven't used us I'll bring them a card or something. Our industry is a big industry and right now it's a good thing with the economy. A lot of companies don't want to hire new employees and then have to lay them off and with us they can get people for just a couple days or a few weeks. It's like test driving a car and finding something you like. A guy can go and interview and he can have a great interview, but then the company can find out that the guy is nightmare when he actually comes to work. One of our selling points with the way that the economy is "get someone temporary and if you like them go from there" (Interview, Pascagoula, Miss., June 25, 2008).

Companies do not make a practice of hiring contracted labor as full-time employees. A company individual also in Mississippi explained this:

When you augment or lay off the workforce arbitrarily, that's bad. Tie ins [contractors] need to bridge projects – and this is legally, because of the hours. It's very harsh to layoff and hire. Welders that are laid off go to doing other things. The industry has a hard time maintaining a workforce for a long time because of contract negotiations. What do you do with competent people that you won't need for nine months? You can't train for the skill set. It's not easy to maintain. It took me two to five years to go from a fat to a lean workforce. With a lean one that gives you flexibility (Interview, Pascagoula, Miss., February 11, 2008).

Sustaining the idea that companies have their employees but augment with contractors allows companies to feel—as well as advertise to the community—they deserve employee loyalty and respect and are essentially good employers. They rarely fire or lay off their employees; they

provide good benefits and training programs. And this is often true. But not for those contractors who work on their yards and projects but are employed by labor contractors and subcontractors. *Serial Contract Labor*. Both “René” and I sat exhausted in the Ingleside Dairy Queen, scraping the sides of our cups with red plastic spoons. Already into the second hour of our interview, we had not finished documenting his occupational timeline. As he told me about a job he had in Veracruz, it would remind him of a previous job in Ciudad del Carmen or Louisiana. I noticed lapses of several years he had not listed as working. Sometimes he would also look confused and try to remember where he worked during those years. Other times he said, “no trabajaba en ese entonces; estuve en los terrenos de mi familia.” (I was not working at that time, I was at my family’s land).

I had hoped the occupational timelines would allow me to analyze individuals’ work trajectories: how they learned of positions, how they moved within companies, training they received, reasons they left. One of the most difficult things to do during interviews was recreate an occupational timeline. They did not provide data to examine and manipulate, and the timelines are anything but linear and comprehensive. The workers I interviewed provided me with disjointed work stories; rather than telling me their life narratives, they pieced together collages, testaments to these migrant Mexican oil workers interrupted work lives.

Serial contract work is the new reality for a growing number of workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century . Pablo was an elementary school teacher in Tuxpan, Veracruz. He considered himself a successful teacher and enjoyed working with children. When his children entered adolescence, however, family finances began to strain. He looked for better paying work in the oil industry, eventually migrating to Ciudad del Carmen, where his brother worked and where he had worked

as a young man in the early 1980s. He has been a serial contract laborer since then. “You could say I practically worked for the same company for eight years. But eight interrupted years. Because you go offshore, and then there is no longer a contract, but then later they hire you again and you go offshore. Over and over again” (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, July 14, 2012). This serial contract livelihood, along with the offshore oil industry’s unique work schedule—21 or 14 days offshore, followed by seven or 14 days at home—has promoted circular domestic migration among these workers. With no stable, long-term position, they often maintain their family and home in their places of origin, rarely uprooting their wife and children.

Likewise, those who choose—or are chosen—to work abroad have serial contract livelihoods. Alonso and his coworkers in Ingleside, fellow veracruzanos “Diego,” “Jorge,” and “Carlos” all were living and working with H-2B visas in Texas in 2008. Over the next four years I tried to keep up with their work lives. Although their homes were in different parts of Veracruz, they kept tabs on each other. When Alonso needed work upon returning to Mexico in 2008, Diego told him about a labor contractor looking for first-class welders and about a heliarch welding certification class in Tampico. Carlos was contracted by a Louisiana company to work in the Caribbean and then offshore Africa. He encouraged Alonso to pursue a contract and go with him abroad. But these jobs are temporary, and the areas are not places they necessarily want their families to live. “Home” is the place and the people they return to, not a place they create near their worksite. They migrate to work, which is unstable, precarious, and uncertain. They return home to the place and people and culture that anchors them.

*Contract Surplus and Idleness.* Labor is an important variable in the equation a subcontracting company calculates to prepare a bid for work. Statistical and even actuarial, these equations



include the number of man hours required to complete a job. Despite mathematically calculating labor needs, companies sometimes solicit and contract more workers than needed. Or they may contract the quantity eventually needed once a project is fully running, keeping excess workers idle until needed. When a project starts, only the necessary number of workers will begin work. This amplifies the precarity of individual situations: although they are on the subcontractor's list of employees, they may not in fact have a job. This is the case in the oil industry on both sides of the border, and interviews conducted in both Ciudad del Carmen and Ingleside exposed the reality of workers who are made to believe they have obtained work. Pablo and José found themselves in this position. Upon returning to Ciudad del Carmen after their 14 days rest, they would daily check Cotemar's list to find out when they would return offshore to work. Officially they were employees, but contracted on an as-needed basis. H-2B workers in the US also had to wait weeks for work to start, living off savings or loans.

Pablo believes that subcontractor companies do this to extract more work out of fewer workers and to be paid by Pemex for the original number of workers without providing wages to the unused workers. "The company earns money for the contracted workers who are left without a job after they're told that the project was called off. They do this to squeeze more money out of Pemex." (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, July 14, 2014).

Alonso had similar experiences working with a visa libre in the US. Throughout the spring and summer of 2008 he lamented being on the company's books while continually waiting on a call to go to work. After losing his position in Ingleside at the Gulf Marine Fabricators yard, he moved to Houma, Louisiana, where he had friends and contacts from previous years when he had an H-2B visa. He quickly applied, interviewed, and passed the 6GR welding test, the

foremost test for a first-class welder. He assumed he would commence work soon, but he found himself, *esperando en la banqueta* (on the waiting bench) for weeks. And even after he worked for one 14-day stint offshore, his time onshore was more than he would have preferred. He was always ready: phone charged, powered up, and in his hip pocket, ready to leave at a moment's notice. After several months, he began to feel nostalgia for the long, hot hours in the fabrication yard in Texas—where pay was less, but more stable. Alonso moved from the motel he first rented in Houma—as he was sure he would quickly go to an offshore platform—to sleeping on the floor of a mobile home occupied by six men.

Workers who leave their homes to make better money to give their families a better life abhor idleness. The feeling of uncertainty settles in and takes a firm grip in the idle hours, days, and weeks spent not working. David Griffith (2007:75), who has studied H-2B workers in the southeast US, says of idleness: “For seasonal, temporary workers, especially those who have left their families to work in distant locations for months on end, periods without work—idleness (as opposed to rest or leisure)—are as abhorrent to them as the condition that they work for one and only one employer.” Temporary workers in the oil industry experience idleness when a company has contracted too many people, when jobs are delayed because of technical problems or lack of materials, or even the weather. Despite the relatively high hourly rates oil workers earn both in the US and Mexico, many contracted workers have low annual incomes, a consequence of idle times off the pay clock.

### *Challenges to Getting a Job in a Casualized Labor System*

Really, I've looked. It's been a while that I've been looking, for two years I've looked for something better. Not with just any company but with a better company, that's where I've looked. But now I got it; now I understand: for one reason or another, for your pretty face or whatever, you don't get a position. The

only way is to get yourself a patron, to be recommended by someone in a position of power (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, July 12, 2012).

It took several conversations for “Alberto” to warm up to me. He bluntly asked me what many others kept to themselves: how did he know I was not a spy? Why should he trust me? Why would I trust him to tell me the truth? What business does a white, American, female student have talking with men about their jobs? Eventually I was able to build sufficient rapport for him to confide in me. A 23-year-old from rural Campeche, he had been working for an offshore food service company intermittently in Ciudad del Carmen since 2009. But he urgently wanted a better paying job. His elder brother had migrated to the US several years ago when their family lost farmland at the hand of disreputable neighbors. When his family lost contact with the son in the US and no longer received remittances, Alberto went to Ciudad del Carmen to work in the oil industry.

When Alberto opened up to me, it was immediately evident he believed he was not in a singular position—others in the plaza and other parts of the city were in similar situations. As he spoke to me in the plaza, he would transition from talking in the first person to explain his situation in the second person. His explanation of the situation he and others shared was a call for me to imagine myself in his shoes.

That’s the problem that some are in now, including me: looking for work, if you have studied, maybe you have an engineering degree or a technical degree, it’s all still a mess. There are many obstacles in a good company. Now you may enter quickly, but after two or three months, the work is over and you’re out in the cold again. Now I don’t even spend any time or money with those “good” companies (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, July 12, 2012).

Getting hired by a contracting company is not merely about having the required documents, skills, and experience. Timing and connections are often more important.

Alberto, like many others in the plaza, arrived to Ciudad del Carmen expecting at any moment to be contracted. Interviews I conducted in Ciudad del Carmen included many stories of young men being told they could not be hired because they lacked experience. Yet they had no way no to gain experience until hired. Alberto and others in their early 20s looking for jobs expected their youth—with its strength, fervor, and hunger to work—to appeal to those hiring. But just as those nearing 50 years of age were told they were too old, young men were told they needed more experience. “But no one is born knowing!” Daniel told me, “I ask, ‘Those out on the platforms, were they contracted knowing what to do?’” (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche, Aug. 10, 2012).

Contracting company personnel—labor contractors, middlemen, *enganchadores* (people who, often deceitfully, convince people to sign work contracts with labor contractors)—are infamous for their deceptive and unscrupulous practices. Many of the challenges experienced by people searching for work were direct results of company tactics, chicanery practiced by some hiring personnel, or other employees in positions of power relative to job seekers. Restructuring labor to a casualized and flexible system using more contracting companies and short-term workers opens the door for unmitigated corruption. The hiring and firing of workers in this context are open to corrupt practices and worker rights are more easily mishandled, denied, or abused.

*Corruption and Uncertainty.* The media have decried the labor practices in both the oil industry in Mexico and the use of the H-2B visa in general in the US. In both instances the word “slavery” is used to describe the condition in which workers labor. In an article published in a variety of Mexican newspapers, Pérez (2007) illustrates the corruption and injustices workers contracted by Oceanografía experience, saying they work in a state of semi-slavery: meager

wages, insufficient safety equipment and training, grueling work schedules, few benefits, pay delays of up to four months, liability in the case of accidents, gratuitous dismissals. Likewise, these workers and those on H-2B visas are often made to believe they will make more money and have better benefits and working conditions than they do (Bauer 2008). With few rights apportioned or enforced by the Mexican government or under the provisions of the H-2B visa, temporary workers may find themselves parcel to corruption in an array of forms.

Mexican citizens are quick to denounce political corruption and even larger scale business or union corruption. Nevertheless, it is practiced in daily life (see Olivier de Sardan 1999:28). The “corruption complex” (ibid.:27), which goes beyond the narrow definition of corruption to include nepotism, embezzlement, misappropriation, and cronyism, is culturally embedded. The logics of the corruption complex “dissolve juridically reprehensible practices into the fabric of similar and socially commonplace practices, which happen to be accepted and even esteemed” (ibid.:44). Of special importance in the corruption complex, according to Scott (1972), is the understanding that it is *influence* that is corrupt: that is, outside the context of kinship, friendship, or bribery, an official would not have come to the same decision. Scott (ibid.:68) defines corruption as unchecked bureaucratic “self-indulgence.” Although most scholarly work concerning corruption is political in nature, individual experience in oil industry contracted labor realm is similar.

Scott (ibid.:10) says that most of what we may consider corruption is a “continuation of traditional gift-giving practices.” Gift giving was once, and continues to be in certain parts of the world, an obligatory act, “embedded in an elaborate network of social alliances and status differences.” Those with power—patrons—provide for the poorer of the community as a

redistribution of wealth. Those with less money and power demonstrate their allegiance to their patrons, also through gifts. Even now, gifts may assure a bureaucrat's good graces, prevent important files and documents from disappearing, or give weight to an individual's particular file (Olivier de Sardan 1999:43).

Understanding corruption in the Mexican oil industry labor sector should be focused not on values, but on the structures that promote it. Individuals do not enter into nefarious dealings because they are criminals or are bad hearted. From a worker's perspective, the desirability of attaining a secure job in a tight labor market cannot be overestimated (Scott 1972:13). Likewise, once people achieve a powerful position, often they are obligated to spread their windfall to family and friends. Corruption is present at all levels and includes denying contract workers' rights and benefits for personal gain and contracting of individuals through cronyism, clientelism, nepotism, and the "renting" of jobs.

*Cronyism.* As I sat listening in the Plaza de Tristeza, two of my informants had this exchange:

**Pablo:** Have you gone to *Oceanomentiras*? (play on Oceanografía's name and it's fame for being corrupt—using the word *mentiras* [lies]).

**Alberto:** Yeah, I was there...but still, there they make you take a test that costs \$1,200 pesos. They throw a lot of....well, they put a lot of salsa on their tacos but they're still made with bad meat.

**Pablo:** Ah, yeah

**Alberto:** And then, at the end, they don't hire you. They just hire *puro recomendado* (people with a patron or connections)

**Pablo:** That's the truth, Oceanografía is a company that put up many obstacles for you to get hired. And then it is so difficult to get them to pay you. Super difficult to get paid. Look, I asked for work in industrial safety there, and they made me do an exam with 140-some questions. Obviously they didn't want me to pass. Others only had to do an exam with 30 questions.

**Alberto:** Those are the ones with connections. Those are the ones that go offshore quickly.

**Pablo:** There is a lot of cronyism there.

Cronyism, the practice of giving beneficial treatment to your friends, is rampant in Ciudad del Carmen and was often the only topic interviewees wished to talk about. Several men I interviewed told of being laid off so supervisors' sons, nephews, or others could fill the newly opened position. In fact, cronyism prevails above merit or seniority (Cesta Zamudio 2012): it's not what you know, how well you do the job, or how long you have been employed, but *who* you know. Many young professionals and trained young people—natives to the area—are put out of work, and companies give prime positions to family members and friends, who often lack the preparation, skills, and experience for the work they are given (Sánchez R. 2012; Vargas 2012). These *recomendados* are placed in strategic positions, immediately earning high wages, sometimes not even meeting the minimum requirements for the job. Those without connections in the industry are subsequently not able to receive the benefits of redistributive accumulation, or the spreading of the wealth when someone lands a good position, profits from it, and shares material wealth or power that the position allows (Olivier de Sardan 1999:43).

Cronyism, by definition and design, is an asymmetrical relationship. An individual's success is not determined by the performance on an entrance exam or interview, but by favoritism, friendship, or kinship. And in the context of casualized labor, time is not on a worker's side: he may have a great attitude and work ethic, but if the contract is over before a supervisor gets to know him and perhaps develop a work friendship, he will probably never benefit from cronyism in the future. This is true not only in Mexico, but also in the United States. If a worker jumps

from contract to contract, only the most observant supervisor with a great memory will remember specific individuals.

Corruption is overt, publicized, and renowned in Mexico. It is less conspicuous in the United States. One worker in a yard in Mississippi told a BARA fieldworker that since the 1970s not much has changed: the overall operation had issues with bad management, nepotism, and cronyism, and even though they may not be quite as blatant, they still exist. Yet, other workers in Texas said that having friends in high places will not always help in the direst of times.

*Bribes and Renting Work.* Evya is known as a company that would hire just about anyone, for a price. Job seekers throughout Ciudad del Carmen knew if they found the right person and offered the right price at Evya they would be contracted. Everyone seemed to fully understand that, everyone except me, the anthropologist. I distinctly remember asking, “You mean you were going to get paid 2,000 pesos, right? How is it that you would have to pay to work?” “No, I was going to pay 2000 to get the job!” The group talking with me quickly explained patronage in the realm of oil work, making me feel at once ignorant and naive, yet accepted.

You work to get paid! But for example, ask some around here, “How long have you been looking for work?” “No, two months, two and a half” And if they—the poor things—want to go offshore and think to themselves, “No, if I go offshore and I earn 8,000 pesos, from those 8,000, they take two, I’ll still have 6,000. Well, ok, I’ll do it.” And there it is, you’re in the cycle, after a few stints offshore, they take you off the list and put in another worker who will pay.” Now that company is the worst. Right now, look at what they do: they hire you, give you two or three stints offshore, and they ask you for 2,000 pesos. OK, you’re done: they don’t fire you—they just leave you off the list to go offshore. They put another worker in your place, get 2,000 pesos from him. It’s all corruption, it’s all money, it’s all business (Fieldnotes, Ciudad del Carmen, Aug. 2, 2012)

Dozens, sometimes hundreds, of job seekers wait for work in Ciudad del Carmen— more workers than positions, but the prospect of wages better than in many other industries attracts them. Some individuals consider bribery their only option. The option to give someone part of



one's wage seems wholly better than remaining jobless. Patronage implies the imbalanced, exchange-based power relations between a patron and a client. These relations are infused with rituals of affect, favors, and gifts (Fox 2012).

At their last straw, individuals looking for work pay a supervisor to attain a position, just as one might pay a government agent for particular social benefits (see Gupta 1995). Renting a job from an employer requires not only complicity but trust and knowledge of how the system works (Haller and Shore 2005). Would-be-workers must learn—from conversations with others more savvy or experienced or from trial and error. Learning how to bribe properly, the amounts, appropriate interactions and conditions—the discourse of bribery—provides a minimal assurance of gain.

So you go talk with the guy, the one who helps with hiring, you know how to handle him, where to find him, you know how to act around him. And if you say to this guy, “you know what, there's a guy asking for 2,000 pesos.” Two thousand for seven days offshore. You make, give or take, 4,000, maybe 5,000 pesos per week. Almost your pay goes to pay a bribe to get the job! *Está cabrón* (it's fucking tough) (Fieldnotes, Ciudad del Carmen, June 2012).

Sometimes, however, bribery is even less formal. It starts off with a pat on the back and “I'll do you this favor” from a supervisor. “Felipe,” from southern Veracruz and looking for a position in safety engineering, found himself in that situation, which quickly escalated:

They tell you, “You know what? I'll put you on our roll and you'll go offshore, but each time you come back, each time you come back to land and you get paid, you're going to give a certain amount....At first they don't say it like that, exactly. But they might as well: “*Qué onda?, bajando vamos a tal lado, vamos a un bar, me invitas a comer*” (Hey? When we get to land, we'll go to such and such place, we'll go to a bar and you can buy me a meal.”) And so then it becomes a tradition that each time you come back to Carmen you are paying for them to eat, buying them something. For example, someone working in safety may earn 15,000 pesos: and you pay out 1,000 to 3,000 to that person, the contracting agent or whoever helped get you the position” (Fieldnotes, Ciudad del Carmen, July 18, 2012)

Carlos Velez-Ibañez (1983:44), in his ethnography of culture change in Netzahualcoyotl in central Mexico, describes similar asymmetrical arrangements between employer and worker. “In many ways this is like chattel slavery, but persons must accommodate their values to what is rather than what should be. If a person does not *ponerse bien* (‘place himself well’) by graft, then the probability for maintaining employment is small. But it is not just young men and women who are subject to this type of systematic exploitation: anyone who does not have proper access may have little or no choice but to enter into such a relationship.” What Pitt-Rivers (Pitt-Rivers 1971) called “lop-sided friendships” are relationships entered out of necessity (in the case of the worker) and greed (in the case of the one taking the bribe), proving that the financial need of the work applicants can exceed the notoriety of bribe-taking officials.

The corruption complex many oil workers navigate is banal and generalized. Rather than balk at the idea of paying for a visa or job, padding the pockets of a recruiter, or calling in a favor to an uncle or cousin, workers accept it as part of daily life. One experiences, however, an added layer of uncertainty in the corruption complex. Accepting an offer to enter into a bribe puts the individual at the patron’s will and mercy, but those who may seem “trustworthy today are likely to be debunked tomorrow as misleading or corrupt” (Bauman 2011a:32-33). In an era of short-term relationships and casualized labor practices, promises seem to be made only to be broken and deceived.

A loss of trust in the Mexican state, its inability or lack of desire to protect and care for its citizens, has advanced the propagation of the corruption complex. Many Latin American, Asian, and African countries are infamous for corruption, but American and European corporations are not blameless. In the focused pursuit of capital, “there is no room for a welfare state: that

venerable legacy of industrial society looks suddenly much like a ‘nanny state,’ pampering the slothful, coddling the wicked, abetting the corrupt” (Bauman 2005:91). Transnational corporations operating across borders, subcontracting most work, easily turn a blind eye or claim ignorance about shady dealings with workers. Otherwise upright companies who import labor often go through unregulated and unscrupulous in-country recruiters or labor brokers.

### Ontological Precarity

*Caught between the longing for love  
And the struggle for legal tender...  
He knows that all his hopes and dreams  
Begin and end there.*

Jackson Browne, “The Pretender”

Workers feel the material effects of precarity—skipping meals when funds are not available for even a can of tuna, “hot bunking” (a customary offshore practice of sharing a cot, sleeping when the other individual is working) even when onshore, walking long distances each day when even public transportation is too expensive. And it is much easier to define, talk about, and even quantify material precarity in terms of wages, days without work, how many family members a paycheck must sustain, or any number of variables. Precariousness affects one’s work situation and experience but carries over into the non-work spheres of life (Elcioglu 2010:118). Workers and their family members also feel a deeper, murkier ontological precarity. One must be careful not merely to define the risk of precarity in material terms. Although precarity is indeed connected to poverty and labor practices, precarity is also—and one might say principally—a “problem of human relationships” (Allison 2013:65). Bourdieu (1998:82) believes that work precarity is pervasive: “it is present at every moment in everyone’s mind....It pervades both the

conscious and the unconscious mind.” Precarity affects, then, how one sees, lives in, and interprets the world. Appadurai (1998:226) says “there is a growing sense of radical social uncertainty about people, situations, events, norms, and even cosmologies.” Beyond—yet including—economics and finances, precarity is situated in ordinary actions, everyday rhythms, and immediate decisions (see Berlant 2011).

Precarious working conditions filter into daily life. “Gonzalo” returns to his home in rural Campeche, not having found a job in Ciudad del Carmen; adding salt to the wound he has to call on his wife to pick him up at a bus stop only halfway home because he didn’t have enough cash to pay for the entire fare. “Pedro’s” fiancée calls off their engagement on Facebook while he is offshore. “Carlos” bears not only the financial strain of caring for his dying father, but the emotional weight of knowing he will probably die alone—as Carlos works offshore and his siblings have moved away from the *rancho*. “Sergio” weighs the dangers of overstaying his US visa against the threat of returning to Mexico where he is not able to make ends meet for his family. Navigating unstable and inequitable realities has existential repercussions (Allison 2013:5).

Alonso told me that being a welder means always being away from his family. Even when working as a domestic migrant in Mexico, his work takes him hours from his home, and he only returns for short visits every couple weeks. Sometimes there is an off chance he will be able to see his family every weekend if he is able to get a job near his hometown. “Work is scarce and for short periods of time. For that reason, you have to move around from city to city, or leave the country when the opportunity arises” (Interview, Ingleside, Texas, April 20, 2008). Alonso was

acutely aware of how his economic position, distance from his family, and need to always search for the next job affected him mentally:

Being far from home and family is very lonely. But at the time you are more at ease because of economic stability. But on the other hand, the effect with my family is emotional instability. You also miss many things that you would like to take part in, for example, your children's birthdays, school events, so many things. The work routine promotes depression, loneliness; money may give you tranquility, but not love. You could have 3,000 dollars in your pocket but not be happy. Well, at least me: I miss my family, my culture, my friends, et cetera.

Although he misses it intensely while in the US or at the worksite in Mexico, everything is not entirely perfect at home. Riffs with brothers, a strained relationship with his daughter's mother, the continual search for visa or work opportunities, all attest to the precarity of Alonso's life. During the lonely nights in the US he dreams of his support network, family and friends, but his return home is rarely as triumphant as he hopes. Mentally and corporally worn out with an empty pocketbook more often than not, he returns to sleep on a sofa at his parents' home. Visits to see his daughter are awkward, especially at first; rather than the affection and hugs he wants to shower upon her, she asks for gifts.

These troubled relationships make it difficult to rely on family for financial needs, especially when he has just returned from the US where he was supposed to be making more money than imaginable in Mexico. Reserves that individuals could once count on are drying up—monetary reserves in the bank, families to count on, even educational credentials or skill certifications may no longer be available or useful (Allison 2013:5-6). Beyond material precarity, in which workers are disposable labor power, the “precariat” are disposable humans, whose existential and social condition feels risky, uncertain, and unstable (Allison 2011).

The emotions of living far away from home and family, working long hours, and living in a strange—and perhaps no longer exotic and interesting—place can be difficult to deal with. A

Mexican working in Louisiana said depression is inevitable: “I’ve had depression many times. All of the people in this situation have had depression many times” (Interview, Houma, La., June 28, 2008). Sometimes there is nowhere to turn to help deal with these emotions. The only people they refer to as friends may in fact be primarily coworkers and roommates with whom they have little else in common. They may be good to split the food and motel bill with but not the kind of friends who give you a shoulder to cry on. A labor contractor employee who has taken the role as a de facto cultural liaison said: “you have people that cry, they miss their family, their leaderman screams at them” (Interview, Morgan City, La, July 1, 2008).

### **Life of Fragments**

Daniel was the ethnographer’s dream. During interviews—which were numerous because we never seemed to finish—he seemed to understand the goal of my research better than most. He took joy in exploring how he experienced life and why. When I asked him what he thought of his future or what plans he had, rather than listing a few goals or merely shrugging, like others I had interviewed, he answered very thoughtfully. He began with a type of warning for me:

It could happen to you what happened to me. They could tell you like they told me: “Your contract is for three years.” But look at what happened. They’re done with me; I was laid off. What if I had made the mistake of saying, “I’ll buy myself a car [with my new secure salary]. Just imagine if I had bought one...and then with the payments! That remains very clear while you are working like this: you will never be able to do anything long term. There’s nothing more comfortable in life than to be able to work in a normal stable job, like a teacher. You have a stable position. But this kind of work is not like that. When you are doing well—when you are mentally aware—you think, you *believe* your job is secure, you start to say...well, let’s just say I started to plan. I was planning to get my final engineer certification documents. “I’ll do this; I’ll do that. I can buy a few things. Maybe I can get married.” I was already forming ideas of making a new, better life in the future. Then suddenly when you feel like you have everything under control: Boom! It comes tumbling down, everything is spoiled, thrown into disarray and you have to start again. And you go a little out of control, you are disoriented, you don’t know what to do. Really, you’re like that. And you say to

yourself, "What happened? Why did it happen? Why now?" You really ask yourself: when you now still think about doing things better, the least expected happens. You are left without work and are disconnected from the future (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, Aug. 2, 2012).

Daniel has experienced his life as a series of beginnings with abrupt endings. He has been unprepared for this. His father's life followed a narrative arc that Daniel has not been able to replicate: he finished school, went to work for Pemex, retired when he turned 50, and now is enjoying retirement. Circumstances are different for Daniel. He is not a member of the STPRM because his father gave his *ficha* to his eldest son; therefore, Daniel does not have the luxury of assured life-long employment with Pemex. His parents divorced when he was 13 years old, and Daniel lived with his mother, stepfather, siblings, and stepsiblings. He never felt a part of the family, and altercations with his stepfather were frequent; he was in and out of the house often. These starts and stops, in and outs, inability to see beyond the horizon into the future with any clarity impede Daniel from constructing a sustained life narrative.

Sennett (1998:26-27) asks if it is possible for one to "develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments? The conditions of the new economy feed instead on experience which drifts in time, from place to place, from job to job." What Sennett terms short-term capitalism— the flexible, casual labor regime—allows fewer individuals to pursue a career. Rather than having a "lifelong channel for one's economic pursuits" (ibid.: 9), workers are diverted from one kind of work to another.

Workers in precarious livelihoods are always starting over, always proving themselves. Each new day does not necessarily begin where yesterday left off. Bauman (2011) refers to this as time in the "pointillist" sense. Rather than being cyclical or linear, one's life is broken up into a "multitude of separate morsels," fragmented into episodes, "each one cut from its past and from

its future” (Bauman 1995:91.). The institutions that had once enabled individuals to have a life narrative are gone or serve in a piecemeal capacity. Gone are careers in a single institution, lifetime employment. The safety nets once provided by government institutions for the life of individuals are now short-term and erratic. “Narrative agency,” the ability to interpret events and experiences, seems to have disappeared; people lack the power to interpret what is happening to them, and they feel voiceless (Sennett 2006:188).

The primacy of the short term affects how individuals form attachments with and relate to others. A life of fragments displaces “loyalty and mutual commitment, pursuit of long-term goals, practice of delayed gratification for the sake of a future end” (Sennett 1998:10), placing focus on the immediate moment. Allison (2013:84) says that time is problematic: “the present is gripped by insecurity, the future incites feelings less of possibility than fear.” Getting through the day is of more concern than living harmoniously with others (see Abélès 2010). Sustaining relationships and commitments over the long term becomes a challenge for individuals who find themselves in structures that are falling apart, being redesigned, or reassigned.

## **Relationships**

Workers list their families as the main reason they search for work away from home and the aspect of their lives that suffers most because of their work situations. “Luis,” a 32-year-old from Oaxaca, suffered difficult and broken romantic relationships. Family interactions became increasingly strained as he often had to borrow money from his parents (which they would acquire by pawning jewelry and other items) to pay for room and board when looking for work. Yet they were always at the forefront of his mind:

Those 14 days far from home, far from the people you love and whom you could lose — because of an illness or whatever...you don’t know. And you go offshore,



well, at least I go offshore, to see my loved ones better because of it. And sometimes you don't know if you will see them again when get back to land (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, Aug. 23, 2012).

Many workers speak of the marital and familial issues that arise when working far from home for long periods of time. Many had been divorced, not unlike the domestic population that works offshore. Others had strained relationships with their families, which they attributed to mutual faults, communication deficiencies, and the mere difficulty of the situation. This H-2B worker from Mexico City who was living in Texas spoke for many:

I lost my wife. We had problems. She had to wait more and more. She wanted more and more. The more money you have, the more money you want. I'm the same, I suppose. If I have it, I spend it! Lost the family. But now, my daughter, I'll call her. She has problems in school. But I can't help her with that. But I send money. That's all I can do. (Interview, Ingleside, May 20, 2008).

The money does alleviate the difficulty of the situation to a degree, but workers begin to evaluate their decisions when things seem to start to fall apart, as one worker did who struggled to find a balance between pleasing his wife economically and being with his family:

I don't like this kind of life because my kids are over there. You know what happened to me? I got a divorce because I've worked here many times, many times, many times, and so my relationship broke. This has happened to me and to many other people. [She thought I should come here] because I send the money back but it's not easy to have the papa here and the mama there, but there are consequences....I wish I could bring my family, but I can't with the present system. (Interview, Houma, La., June 29, 2008).

Others attributed relationship problems not merely to their work schedule but also the insecurity of their contracts. Since Pablo left his position as a public school teacher to work in Ciudad del Carmen, he has not held a job for over three months. While he personally takes this as "just the way things are" (*así es!*), it takes a toll on his family and marriage. Other workers had similar experiences with their families and wives. José's wife deplored his trips to Ciudad del Carmen to look for work because to her it was a place where he would just find trouble:

brothels, sex workers, and seedy bars abound. Carlos attributes his divorce to the mutual distrust that resulted from extended time away from home.

Migrant workers I spoke with were quick to cover up any doubt that they were not good parents or spouses: “I call home at least once a week.” “I send part of my *quincena* (biweekly paycheck) home to help with the household expenses.” Some of these migrants returned to their families nearly monthly, while others would go over a year without seeing loved ones, but the effect on their relationships was similar. Many dealt with their families in a business-like manner. For optimum operation, family matters were conducted according to a schedule, if possible, through bank deposits or text messages with Western Union pickup codes. Transactions, Soros (1998) says, have replaced relationships in how people interact with one another. Distanced relationships, a defining feature of which are these transactions, is a key aspect of the geography of globalization. Globalization has created new flows and patterns, which in turn affected relationships between people. When labor is uprooted, families often pay the costs.

### **Identity through Work, and Loss Thereof**

After meeting in the local Walmart parking lot, I followed Diego to the Chinese buffet for a late dinner. He needed several hours after work to let his body cool down after welding all day before he could meet with me. He was not the only H-2B welder I met while in the field who would not shower immediately after work, for fear of rheumatisms or other ailments. In his early fifties, he is quick to tell you he’s been welding since age 13. His thick glasses and the burn scars peeking from under his shirt collar and cuffs attest to his claim. Self-assured and talkative, Diego spoke freely about his jobs, starting as a shop hand as a teenager in his hometown in rural

southern Veracruz. He started working away from home when repairing sugar cane machinery could not pay for his children to attend school. Like many Mexican welders from the Gulf Coast states, he worked in Coatzacoalcos and Ciudad del Carmen. Eventually he started working offshore to make more money. In 2006, he began working in Louisiana and Texas with an H-2B visa. When I asked him to expound on his experiences as a migrant working in the US, I did not expect his response: “¿Soy migrante yo? No, soy un soldador...” “I’m a migrant?! No, I’m a welder....”

At the apex of the boom, when I met Diego, this made sense. His identity was firmly tied to his vocation and skill set. Yet after the financial crisis, when H-2B visas were no longer easy to attain, and work in Mexico as a welder was scarce, his identity was no longer bound to welding. So what was he? Individuals ascribe value to being able to categorize and differentiate themselves (Durkheim 1893). Labor, as a source of family and communal honor, is a primary way people identify. With casualized work regimes, however, this identity is no longer as stable as it once was. “The workplace and labor, especially work-and-place securely rooted in a stable local context, are no longer prime sites for the creation of value or identity” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000:294). Companies once provided workers a steady salary, protection, and identity. “Irregular workers, by contrast, are on their own, struggling to make a living, and bereft of a place that feels homey and secure” (Allison 2013:65). When a contract only lasts a few months, or even less, workers no longer craft their identity around being a membership in a certain company. And with changing skill set requirements, vocations sometimes may not be able to provide a sense of belonging.

## Civic identity

In Ciudad del Carmen one senses an absence of civic mindedness. Trash is heaped in areas where deluges have washed out crevices in streets; plastic and glass bottles litter the beaches. Squirrels and iguanas live off food scraps left in the plazas. Inhabited primarily by people who do not refer to the city as home, people who come to find work or to spend the few hours before going offshore for several weeks, Ciudad del Carmen is testament to a loss of civic identity and interest in civic affairs. Migrant workers often spend more time away from their communities of origin than at home. There is an influx of outsiders, temporary workers without a vested interest in seeing the city as a clean, safe place; they don't really *live* there, nor do their families.

Civic disinterestedness was manifested in the litter and disrepair in Ciudad del Carmen, but also in a general feeling of apathy. Individuals I interviewed in the spring and summer of 2012 (a presidential election year in Mexico) did not vote. While some may have not been able to vote because they would be away from home or offshore, others showed no interest in politics, stating that they had no faith in the election process or politics in Mexico. Six year earlier, in 2006, the opposition candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, claimed election fraud. In 2012 the story repeated itself, this time with less fervor and more resignation.

Another manifestation of civic apathy and general indolence are “*ni-nis*” (neither-nor). Ni-ni refers to a person, usually a young person, who neither studies nor works. This is the equivalent to NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) in English-speaking countries. More often than not, young men coming to Ciudad del Carmen to look for work came in pairs or with a group. Without fail, at least one member of the group would be along for the ride, someone who halfheartedly looked for work because his friends did. Likewise, workers mentioned ni-ni

siblings or children, usually with a hint of despair or disgust, especially if they had tried to help them pay for school or attain work. Invariably, ni-nis lived with their parents or other family, were marginalized, and felt defeated by the lack of options available to them.

Sennett (1998:52-53) asks, “are there any limits to how much people are forced to bend?” What is the tensile strength of a human? At what point will bending, twisting, and reaching cause a person to break? Precarity—not merely material, but life pervading—tests individuals, families, and communities. People utilize tactics to respond to precarity at many levels. Sadly, though, adapting to and bearing the burdens of risk and imposed flexibility “requires resource reserves that are difficult for underemployed and poorly remunerated workers to maintain” (McAllister 1998:238).

## Chapter 6: Tactics

*Calculations of risk may help in a world marked by regularity. But irregularity is the trademark of the world we inhabit.*

Zygmunt Bauman, *Collateral Damage*

### Uncertainty and Decision Making

*As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.*

Albert Einstein, "Geometry and Experience"

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, uncertainty pervades migrant Mexican oil workers' lives. This chapter explores how individual workers deal with uncertain and precarious livelihoods. In an age when uncertainties are no longer anomalies or irruptions in a predictable world, the way one acknowledges and copes with the precariousness of life makes life matter and defines "what it means to be human" (Kleinman 2006:1).

Ask a scientist or other so-called rational, professional decision maker how to deal with uncertainty, and she will likely claim that reducing uncertainty by collecting additional information is the first step to making a good decision. Yet many types of uncertainty cannot be reduced this way; they cannot be quantified. Lipshitz and Strauss (1997:152) claim that "people make decisions in ignorance (i.e., without information on the probabilities and utilities of potential outcomes) by following arguments that do not quantify risks." Workers, while far from making decisions or acting with a framework of precarity out of utter ignorance, are required to struggle against various conditions of uncertainty and risk arising from industrial policies and work situations.

Workers develop tactics to persevere in precarious times. Uncertainty is, quite certainly, unsettling. And contending with it can be like plodding through mud when one is used to jogging on dry, packed land. Anne Allison (2013:13) reminds us that grappling with uncertainty is a different response than gripping onto familiar securities. Old strategies (e.g., learning from the past, obtaining a useful skill) no longer always work. The times are changing, and if individuals do not learn to change with them, they will flounder, perhaps even more than the person who takes a blind leap into the unknown.

Proving one's employability through so-called traditional means has diminished in increasingly destabilized economies (see Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Sennett 1998). Workers now must take it upon themselves to gain information about how "opportunity structures" operate, learn their access points and strategize how to enter them, and "invest time, psychic energy, and financial resources to take advantage of them" (Smith 2010:279-280). This process often requires the cultivation and nurturing of human, cultural, and social capital.

### **Strategies as Contextual, Contingent Coping**

At once intrepid, adaptable, and self-responsible, while equally deterritorialized, decentered, and decollectivized (Allison 2013:16), workers living and working in this age of uncertainty must locate at a moment's notice new ways of getting by. These coping mechanisms, however, are contextual and contingent on geography, industry, and age, among other variables. Smith (2010:295) notes that one's ability to manage risk and reduce its costs is often class-stratified. Education, knowledge about institutional, political, and legal systems, access to money, all affects one's ability to navigate precarious work situations. Likewise, if workers are to successfully cope with uncertainty, they must do so adaptively (Lipshitz and Strauss 1997:160).

Multiple manifestations of precarity “affect the way people do their jobs, the decisions they make, the direction and extent of their aspirations, and their willingness to comply with or consent to changes in workplaces and in the employment contract” (Smith 2001:168).

The casualization of labor, one of the “asymmetrical conditions” created by the capitalistic accumulation process (Spyridakis 2013:3), has created an environment in which workers must actively adapt. Using a multitude of skills (both “hard” and “soft”), flexibility likely learned the hard way, and a commitment to work ethic, workers and would-be workers must be prepared to *hacer la lucha* (literally “do battle” in Mexican Spanish) with the unknown, the uncomfortable, the painful, and the dangerous. In an industry that is for workers both inherently risky—even dangerous—and structurally precarious, survival at any level requires a wide spectrum of coping tactics.

Spyridakis (2013), in his research on what he calls “liminal workers” in Greece, points out that identifying workers’ strategies as being located on the extreme poles of rational or irrational is inappropriate. Strategies, maneuvers, and coping mechanisms are embedded in a complex web. Although what seems rational in one context can seem irrational in another, it is possible to explore the variety of motives “by looking upon them as not given and self-evident” (Spyridakis 2013:3).

### **Decision-Making Strategies in Uncertainty**

Lipshitz and Strauss (1997) have identified several strategies that decision makers employ to cope with uncertainty, each of which incorporates several tactics: reduce uncertainty, acknowledge uncertainty, and suppress uncertainty. Tactics used to reduce uncertainty include collecting additional information before making a decision, using statistical methods to predict



future events based on information obtained from present or past, assumption-based reasoning, imagining a possible future, getting advice from others, and improving predictability by adopting shorter-term goals. Acknowledging uncertainty involves taking uncertainty into account when choosing a course of action, preparing to confront (or avoid) possible risks, and weighing pros and cons. Finally, suppressing uncertainty includes denial of uncertain circumstances, rationalization (such as coping with uncertainty symbolically, by going through the motions of reducing or acknowledging uncertainty), reliance on intuition and luck, disregard of information regarded as undesirable — the “Pollyanna effect” (ibid.:154), resolving uncertainty and confusion symbolically to make stronger the illusion of predictability and “provide direction [that] cannot be achieved by rational analysis” (ibid.). Lipshitz says these “seemingly irrational tactics of suppressing uncertainty help decision makers avoid paralysis when they cannot cope with their uncertainty by reduction or acknowledgement” (ibid.).

If one begins to analyze migrant Mexican oil workers’ precarious reality, which includes a multitude of uncertainties, it quickly becomes evident that workers may at times employ these coping mechanisms. Eduardo, a 33-year-old *maniobrista* (one of the lowest levels in the hierarchies of categories in the offshore oil industry in Mexico. Maniobristas are assistants to craft workers and perform a variety of tasks that may be performed by roustabouts, operators, or stevedores in English parlance), provides an example.

I met Eduardo, like many of my respondents in Mexico, in Ciudad del Carmen’s main plaza, dubbed “*La Plaza de Lamentos*” (Plaza of Mourning). In the wee hours of the morning he returned to the island after working 14 days offshore. He was walking around the city center, stretching his limbs, feeling free to burn off energy that had been contained in the cramped

quarters of the *lanchas* (boats that take company workers to platforms or servicing ships in the Campeche Sound). Although Eduardo's work is hard offshore and he was exhausted and needing rest, walking around the plaza in jeans and a t-shirt — not overalls! — helped him *atterrizar* (settle). Unlike other company workers in Ciudad del Carmen, he did not return home for his two weeks "off." Eleven years previously, Eduardo had migrated to the southeast United States and worked in ironworks making fencing and decorative iron items for residences and businesses. The recent economic recession finally prompted him to return home in 2011. His hometown, and for that matter, the entire state of Veracruz, was overrun by of the Zeta drug cartel. His family feared Eduardo, as an able-bodied man recently returning from *el norte* and thought to have cash, would be targeted by the Zetas and potentially murdered or — and perhaps worse — recruited into their throng. Migrating to the US was no longer an option. He had lived enough of the recession to know that being unauthorized and unemployed in the US was not for him. A neighbor told his family about offshore work in Ciudad del Carmen, and together they decided it was best for him to seek work there and return only when necessary.

Eduardo had just finished his first stint offshore with his contracting company. Although it took him over a month to find work, he was motivated to prove his work ethic and skills, in hope of an eventual promotion to a higher category. Two weeks later, when he was told his next subida was postponed indefinitely, he was still in high spirits and indefatigable. When I asked how he felt about this delay in being able to return to work, with a toothy smile, he responded: "*No le hace; no me agüito*" (It doesn't matter; it doesn't get me down).

Eduardo and his family fully acknowledged the insecurity and uncertainties involved in living in a lawless, dangerous place. His family was able to provide a minimal level of financial

security through farming and livestock, but they were not able to protect him from what they recognized as an imminent threat: drug cartels. Fearing that Eduardo risked death or conscription into the cartel, he and his family imagined potential developments—an uncertainty-reduction tactic. This helped them to decide relatively easily to have him search for work elsewhere—an exit strategy.

Within the oil industry in Ciudad del Carmen, however, he was less able to employ more active strategies to deal with employment uncertainties. He was alone in a city he did not know and trying to navigate a complex and confusing industry. When he was successful in gaining employment and working offshore the first time, he was ecstatic—only to be confused when he wasn’t called to work again promptly. Denying any uncertainty that may exist, he preferred not to think about it, grin, defer any action, and wait for the call to go offshore.

In fact, many of those searching for jobs I encountered preferred to deny their precarious situations. A group of five 20-something men from the Candelaria area of Campeche, traveled to Ciudad del Carmen to find company contract work. Only one stayed in Carmen to work offshore. One was told he would need to apply again for his *libreta de mar* (identification documentation that each individual working offshore must possess), another was told to wait outside a company’s headquarters only to be forgotten or perhaps completely disregarded. They reunited in the plaza in the afternoon. “*Caballo*,” the nickname the men from Candelaria called the most seasoned of their group, thwarted any sadness and frustration caused by an unproductive day by saying to the youngest, “*no te chivés, así es esta onda*” (don’t get distressed, this is just how things go). Time and time again, I heard men tell others who were at the ends of their ropes

similar things. Forget about the hardship, it will somehow work out. Don't worry. It's not as bad as it seems.

The things men told others when they were at their wits' end were not merely empty words of comfort. They believe it and live it. "No te chives, así es esta onda" is a means of denying uncertainty. If this is the way the job hunt is, the way it is supposed to be, then what any one individual experiences is not extraordinary or even unjust. Suppressing the host of uncertainties involved in finding and keeping a job prepares individuals for living day to day without excess vexation, but this illusion of certainty may cause would-be workers to pass over potential means to successfully obtain work within the precarious system.

*The Illusion of Certainty.* Miguel always had a story to tell and would scurry across the plaza to update me on his job prospects. At over 53 years old, no oil industry company in Mexico was likely to hire him. He painted for me the picture of his experiences and aptitudes.

I arrived here very young. I've been going offshore for 20 years. I received all the equipment; I was the first engineer on board. I was younger and I earned a lot of money and I had the bad fortune of poorly choosing women....I studied at the *Politécnico Nacional* and I moved here in '91, to the petroleum zone. So when the equipment arrived I received them and put them in service. You can say I was involved from the beginning to the end—I knew the whole business. By taking care of the company's interests for so many years. But now they're getting their hands in everything. People with experience like us—we know everything that goes on aboard. Everything. It went really well for me for a while. I suppose I became a mercenary. I got used to living well, earning a lot, and now I'm paying for it all. Believe me, I'm paying for my sins.

Each time I talked with Miguel his situation became more and more dire. He was running out of money to pay his *litera*; he hadn't washed his two changes of clothes in over two weeks; he hadn't eaten for a day and a half. Because he was always on the run to a human resources appointment or needing to check on where he had stored his belongings, we completed our interview in *rachas* (bits of time). Sometimes we would go to Las Monarcas Tacos on Avenida

22, and I would order a plateful of tacos to share, as I knew he hadn't been able to eat well for several weeks. Despite everything tumbling around him, Miguel was absolutely sure this time he would get contracted and get a job. He just was waiting on that one phone call that would solve everything.

Miguel created an illusion of certainty of his situation. An illusion that gave him hope each day that his situation was normal and to be expected because this is part of the "game" one must play to eventually get contracted and earn a good wage. The belief that the next phone call would be a hiring manager who recognized the value of his experience and skill helped him disengage from the everyday stress of precarious life (see Ettlinger 2007:319). Yet what he has learned in his years of working in the industry may actually be seen by supervisors as obstacles of new changes and mindsets (see Sennett 1998:94).

*There's no work so tirin' as danglin' about an' starin' an' not  
rightly knowin' what you're goin' to do next"*

George Eliot, *Adam Bede*

*Inaction.* On the flip side of denying uncertainty is becoming overwhelmed by uncertainty to the point of inaction. While some, such as Miguel, attempt to create an illusion of certainty, others may be paralyzed by the "specific global events and macroscale structures," manifested as precarity at the "microscale of everyday life" (Ettlinger 2007:319). This happened with José. Cotemar never formally laid off José, a 33-year-old maniobrista. But the company also never called him back to work offshore. When I first met José, he called the head office several times a day to see why his name didn't appear on the list. For each subida, Cotemar would post outside the company hotel a list of names who would be going offshore soon. José expected his name would be on the next list and it never was. Tired of calling and dealing with vague answers from

secretaries and security guards at the company office, he started looking for work elsewhere. No one was hiring. Each day for two weeks he would travel from his home in Isla Aguada, visiting various companies he had heard were hiring: a Mexican company one day, a Chinese the next.

And then he gave up. As Sennett (1998:91)says,

When a person lacks belief that anything can be done to solve the problem, long-term thinking can be suspended as useless. However, focal attention may remain active. In this state, people will turn over and over again the immediate circumstances in which they are caught, aware that something needs to be done even though they do nothing.

After years of serial contingent employment in the Mexican oil industry, José couldn't take it anymore. During much of my fieldwork in Ciudad del Carmen, José and I would meet to talk about how his life was going, if he had applied for any jobs, the mounting problems in his marriage. When I asked what he saw himself doing in five to ten years, he answered, with weight of two decades of stress and financial troubles showing on his eyelids and shoulders, "*Ya me quiero—cómo dicen?—retirar*" (Now I just want to—how do you say it?—retire).

José's situational anxiety had caused him to lose sight of himself. Worried about how he would pay next month's rent and if he would have money to pay for his children's school supplies, he replayed and regretted past actions and obsessed about the future. But neither were much help in the present. His apprehension paralyzed him.

*Traits of an Uncertainty Manager.* Neither José nor Miguel, nor many like them, are ideally equipped to cope with uncertainty in their work and everyday lives. José, engulfed by precariousness, has given up. And Miguel, while positive and hopeful, lives in a fantasy of certainty and resists taking opportunities that do not fit with his ideal job. Sennett (2006:3) claims "only a certain kind of human being can prosper in unstable, fragmentary social conditions." To prosper, an individual must address three challenges: time, talent, and surrender.

In a context of casualized employment conditions, a worker can no longer conceive of time in the long term. Workers must learn to “manage short-term relationships, and oneself, while migrating from task to task, job to job, place to place” (ibid.:4). An individual’s life narrative in this situation is at risk of becoming fragmented, like a collage with bits of an experience here, a relationship there, a lovely moment here, a hardship and failure tacked on there. Institutions and employment no longer provide the scaffolding for a long-term frame of one’s life; individuals, if they are to prosper, must improvise their own life narratives (ibid.). Under changing and precarious conditions, individuals must adapt their talents. Skills useful yesterday may be dated today and completely passé tomorrow. Individuals must be attuned to shifts in skill demands and not merely develop new ones quickly but demonstrate the capability to appropriate abilities.

In the modern economy, the shelf life of many skills is short; in technology and the sciences, as in advanced forms of manufacturing, workers now need to retrain on average every eight to twelve years. Talent is also a matter of culture. The emerging social order militates against the ideal of craftsmanship, that is, learning to do just one thing really well; such commitment can often prove economically destructive. In place of craftsmanship, modern culture advances an idea of meritocracy which celebrates potential ability rather than past achievement (Sennett 2006:4).

Learning AutoCAD, for example, a useful skill in the oil and other industries, may be profitable and helpful for attaining work today, but tomorrow or several years from now the industry standard may turn to another computer program entirely. It is not that learning a specific skill and becoming an expert will hurt an individual’s job prospectives. On the contrary. But more important than skills are enterprise, general mechanical acumen, and being *movido* (literally, someone who moves and is animated, but a nuanced definition would be “spirit” or “gumption”). Industry officials or hiring agents never so pointedly expressed that they wanted this trait in a worker. Looking to fill immediate and finite needs, they would actually say that

they look to hire people for contracts with specific skill sets. Yet workers, who must see their work trajectory as a series of contracted positions, need to take advantage present when new projects start or new problems arise. Savvy workers can identify ways of solving particular issues and fill a future need.

That said, workers cannot cling to the past. A pipe welder who refuses to learn fluxcore because he is an expert stick welder (SMAW welder) and that skill has always provided him work, will be hard-pressed to find work when a new project arrives and companies only contract people with fluxcore skills. Sennett says people must learn how to “let go of the past” and remember that “past service in particular earns no employee a guaranteed place” (ibid.) in an industry where subcontracted power relations dominate. No skillset or body of knowledge will be needed forever. What is recommended as useful and indispensable today will become archaic knowledge soon. A peculiar personality trait needed in this age is to have a light grip on the past, “one which discounts the experiences a human being has already had. This trait of personality resembles more the consumer ever avid for new things, discarding old if perfectly serviceable goods, rather than the owner who jealously guards what he or she already possesses” (Sennett 2006:5).



## Tactics

*"The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing"*

Archilochus

### Strategies and Tactics

A traditional and otherwise helpful decision-making framework allows an understanding of how workers cope. Yet it is often nearly impossible for a worker to reduce uncertainty in a given situation because it is a byproduct of conscious strategies developed by industrial officials to maximize profits. Acknowledging their precarious situations and the associated uncertainties puts individuals in a position to deal with their reality, and suppressing uncertainty allows a person to move and act without taking uncertainty into account. Some may create an illusion of certainty while others are overwhelmed to the point of inaction. Another approach to exploring the meanings of workers' assorted ways of maneuvering within precarity takes into account the importance of relational ties and the contingencies of their experiences, which shape how they come to act the way they do. De Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics sheds light on the relationship between structures and agents (Bourdieu 1990), allowing greater insight into workers' coping mechanisms.

Departing from a traditional military-oriented understanding of strategies and tactics, de Certeau does not conceive of tactics and strategies in this hierarchical framework. In a military context, a strategy is the identification of principle operations, usually in wartime. Tactics are the techniques and procedures used to carry out those operations. Rather than adopting this conventional military hierarchical framework, de Certeau identifies tactics as actions in

opposition to strategies. Tactics are enacted *within* the logic of strategies, which are the production frameworks implemented by institutions and power structures.

Strategies are necessarily rooted in place. Power structures, such as governments or industries, can assert a strategy to “capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances” (de Certeau 1984:6). Strategies are overarching. De Certeau turns Foucault’s argument around, showing that the panoptic society can only see what it is positioned to see. “They are blind when faced with a practice that appropriates their positions and means and uses them for different ends” (Wild 2012:7), which is exactly what tactics do.

Tactics operate within the spaces of institutions; they are actions within imposed systems. A tactic makes use of the “cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse” (Fiske 1989:37). The common individual is able to escape from the total control of powerful institutions—there is *Spielraum* (room for play) in the “prescriptions of society” (Wild 2012:7). This is where individuals engage in tactics. Lacking power and acting within an imposed framework, the individual must act “in-between and sometimes despite the institutional effort. He is called to act, but he is weak in two respects. He does not have the power to impose his will on the system. And the moment in time when action can be successful is not chosen by him, but determined by the situation” (ibid. 8-9).

Tactics are complex, plural, temporal and improvised. The “art of weak”—in fact, lack of power determines method—tactics involve adapting to the environment, taking advantage of unpredictable changes, seizing opportunities, and using what is readily available. Unlike

strategies, tactics are rootless and momentous, rather than fixed in space and time. The tactician uses *kairos*, the opportune moment, and must constantly manipulate events to turn them into opportunities (de Certeau 1984:xix). Everyday powerless people devise tactics, like Odysseus' *metis*, or cunning, to act within a situation, get by, and make do. By employing tactics one does not seek to win or stand up to institutional powers, but merely turns the tables on the strong. The individual is opportunistic: he wants to act well in the face of the challenges in life, carry on and hopefully be able approach the next challenge.

Tactics are complex, plural, temporal, improvised: they are *bricolage*. Fiddling and tinkering within the course set by those in power, individuals (*bricoleurs*) use their wit, ruses, tricks, and subterfuge. And like Sennet's (2006) idea of an ideal worker who must not hold fast to the past but use memories of it, individuals are tactical: "Memory lets them gather imprints of former use, by retaining stories of earlier occasions or proverbs that have a rule-like character. But they follow no proper rules or logic. If one can speak of a logic here at all, it is "a logic of the operations of action relative to types of situations" (de Certeau 1984:21).

Workers maneuver within the spaces of institutionalized uncertainty. Using available resources, they wage the "war of the uncertain" (Mbembe 2000a:271) just to get by. For Hoffman (2011:85), the everyday activities outside the workplace prepare workers (or those seeking work) to become ingenious: "life increasingly is about innovating in ways that will be useful" (ibid.). Improvised tactics may achieve results some times, at other times an individual may fall flat, only to start again (Mbembe 2000a:271).

*Work in the Informal Economy*. "That's not how you bolear (shine shoes)!" was the first thing I heard Pablo utter, as he was getting his worn out black leather dress shoes shined by a boy in the

Plaza de Lamentos. He was quick to get down on the ground, take up the rag and show the boy how to produce a real shine. Good humored, he took his unemployment streak in stride and was happy to help teach someone to make a better living in a tiny way. He sat getting his shoes shined anew and lamented that he hadn't brought his cooler to Carmen. If he'd known he wouldn't be on the list to go offshore he would have at least sold bottles of soda and water! Pablo had worked in the safety department most recently and had been in serial contingent employment in Ciudad del Carmen off and on since 1984. Between contracts, and even during his descanso (14-day break after working offshore), Pablo fended for himself to counteract past defeats and present uncertainties.

I work in a variety of things—to survive, you know? To survive I would shine shoes, washed cars. For a while I borrowed a tricycle and sold purified water from door to door. I met this guy who worked at the purifying plant and he'd give me a good price on *garrafrones* (a water jug with a volume of about 19 liters). And why did I do that? Because in that way and for that moment, I was my own boss: I only bought water from the plant and then distributed it. See? I resold the water and kept my earnings. Sometimes I would even let other people sell for me—sometimes I had my own workers! It's part of what you have to do to survive, while you're looking for work or just while I was on my 14 days of rest. And I did well. Sufficiently well to even loan money to people if necessary. My kids were little when I was selling water, and they'd say that I was rich because they'd see the pile of coins on the table in the evenings! They said I was rich, and really, things were good then. I would work offshore when I had a contract and then at home I would sell water every day. There was always enough money to get by—we never lacked money for food. My kids had a good life. I feel things were good for us.

Pablo took advantage of the oil industry work schedule to supplement his income and make sure his family had the necessities to survive. In addition to selling water, in his hometown of Tuxpan, Veracruz, he also made and sold cakes—which he admitted was a little more embarrassing than selling water “because it's not very masculine to go door to door selling

cakes.” But the fact that he did whatever he could speaks to his attitude and gumption to get by—*“porque no hay de otra”* (because there is no other option).

And because I worked however necessary, I would not have problems until I get a job. But hey, God knows why things happen. And the people can say about me, “You see, he’s earning a living, he’s doing something.” But not everyone does that, other people beg for money—it’s easier. Some people on buses, walk around with a guitar, in fact, I saw a friend a while ago that has his guitar and sings on buses. What do I say to that? “How convenient that you carry your own tool.” He answered: “Well yes, because there is no work, I have to do something.”

What informal activities individuals engage in is dependent on the local sector. They are also difficult to define: they include various practices that are dependent upon an individual’s situation. Informal activities go hand in hand with formal work. Rather than regarding any money-generating activity as beneath them or embarrassing, all the individuals I interviewed are proud of being able to make ends meet, even when it is a struggle. In circumstances of high unemployment and underemployment, making a living and providing for family is more important than appearances. José drove a municipal bus for several months for a friend between subidas and was able to pay for his sons’ school supplies although he was not working offshore. This mixture of overlapping employment relations—a blend of formal contracts and other work to supplement livelihoods—characterizes many individuals’ and families’ tactics for navigating precarity.

*Unpaid Work and Labor Paid In-Kind.* Another tactic that unemployed job seekers use is to work off contract or without pay. They do this to get their foot in the door, to make a name for themselves as an intrepid, hard worker. It also seems that some would prefer to work for free than do nothing. After over a month on the “run around” of several companies, Miguel, the mechanical engineer described above, told me he had offered his services without a contract:

It’s been a long time and I haven’t signed a thing. It’s been a long time and I’ve been doing work for them that deserves a contract, you know, so I’d be “in.” But no, ten days ago they gave me the exam, without contracting me. But it was an

opportunity cost, you know? They would evaluate me depending on my performance and finally evaluate me as I thought was right. I want this position because it fits me—fits my needs and goals— and hopefully I can *salir adelante* (get by or get ahead) (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, Aug. 20, 2012).

Workers, especially older workers closing in on the age that oil companies will no longer hire them, often want to take any opportunity to prove their skills or experience. It makes sense that one would want to do this in an industry that esteems experience beyond anything: it defines the worker's place in the (local) industrial employment structure (Spyridakis 2013:110). Working in unpaid positions, or positions paid in-kind, provides workers a way to “establish themselves as good workers, employees who can be trusted by managers and employers” (Smith 2010:291).

Several workers, in addition to Miguel, told me of their plans to work without pay until contracted. Those who are especially intent on working in their preferred position or area were the ones who expressed interest in working without a contract. Apart from allowing them to show what they can do, they saw it as a way to just help get by and pass time. Asking for in-kind pay helped them subsidize the cost of the job search in one of the most expensive areas of Mexico.

What will I ask them in exchange: one thing, that they contract me later on. And another thing: that they authorize to take care of my housing or food. Either one. And nothing else. I'll take care of the other part. I'll work without pay if they help me save the money I have saved, because I spend so much here (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, July 14, 2012).

Carlos Vélez-Ibañez (1983:43-44) also found young people who worked for free for potential employers. These would-be apprenticeships or internships provide employers with control over workers, even before they are hired and the contract signed. In a context of high competition among the working class, “this method of employment is highly profitable for the employer and

coerces the prospective employee into a totally asymmetrical relationship—one in which employee rights are usually laid aside.”

*Illicit Improvisation.* I will never forget my first walk through the Plaza de Lamentos in Ciudad del Carmen. Like any other plaza in Mexico, snack vendors and boleros roam between the trees and benches. Squirrels, pigeons, and cat-sized iguanas vie for crumbs or nuts. But relatively few children scamper about begging for a balloon or another toy often sold in Mexican public areas. In Ciudad del Carmen droves of men of working age—from a minimum of 10 to hundreds at a time—sit around the plaza, most with plastic folders containing work documentation. Men guard their documents, clutch them, sit on them to be certain they won’t be lost. They thumb through them, making sure they are in order.

See all the documentation an engineer has to have? All of this, look. My military draft card. The *libreta* de mar—the famous *libreta* de mar. Look, it’s in color. This is my first *libreta*, a copy of it because I lost it. Safety courses that I’ve completed. Medical exam—where it shows that I don’t have anything, absolutely nothing wrong. [Showing an old identification card] Look at my young face—only knowledge, you know? No experience. My title, certificate, professional title. Everything they ask for. Record of my specializations, instrumentation technician. Here’s my proof of address. Work identifications from where I’ve worked...fortunately I’ve been and worked...oh no, I’m missing one I don’t see here. No, no, it’s not here! ¡ *Chihuahuas*! I don’t see it. I’ll have to get it later. Well, recommendations from all the supervisors and bosses I’ve had. All of them. Capacitation programs. Here’s a credential I have that enables me to sign permits for high-risk processes (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, Aug. 21, 2012).

Without a central, digital depository for this information, job seekers must keep all their paperwork in order. One item out of place or missing may mean the difference between getting a job or not. Industrial officials claim to highly value experience and thus require documentation thereof. Young people, or others who have entered the industry at a later life stage, struggle to get that first foot in the door without previous experience.

A tactic some have devised in this framework of valuing both experience and youth is to falsify documents, letters, and credentials. Some pay to have this done by a “professional,” others pay someone with ties inside a particular company to obtain “real fakes,” still others produce their own using Photoshop or other similar programs.

I had my past work credentials and one that I had falsified. That’s why computers exist! No, see, the thing is, one of the companies that I put as a reference, the person who founded the company is my nephew. So he told me, “Uncle, if you need a credential, this is my format and a recommendation letter. You can just make them. And if they call me, I’ll say that, yes, you worked here” (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, Aug. 21, 2012).

Falsifying work credentials and letters of recommendation was widespread and workers shared them with me without hesitation or shame. The culture of subcontracting companies demands experience while at the same time values youth, a combination that makes it difficult for young people to enter contracted employment. Obtaining, or at least creating, experience, I was often told, had become a matter of necessity.

Daniel spent time with his buddies in a cybercafé pulling company logos off the Internet, processing them in Photoshop, and incorporating them into formats that fit credential cards and letters of recommendation. Fakes. He also paid a supervisor to procure safety course documentation.

Well, yeah, I paid 3,000 pesos for papers that aren’t real. Because I was desperate, you know?—I want to work in my field. The kink in the deal was that once I had them, I didn’t want to use them. What am I going to do with these? What if they’re not real and when I present them to the company I get caught? But then the coordinator of the company started talking with me, he said, “You know, I can get you all the documentation for the required courses, except the signatory course” (the most important and the most expensive). I can get you the courses but you have to give me 6000 because I’ll have to pay the person who conducts the courses.” I told him, “Yes, no problem, but will I get to work?” He said, “Yes, and you’ll recuperate that money in the first subida.” So I got the money together and gave it to him (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, May 7, 2012).



Workers locate opportunities to illicitly access necessary documents to work in a number of spaces. They get “clean fakes” from people in their social networks, produce them themselves, and purchase real documents from people working in the industrial complex. Fake and forged documents are produced and used within a system that makes them necessary. As (Srivastava 2012:87) says, “cultures of copying are part of networks of disorder”—faking takes place in a disordered and dysfunctional system but also has an ordering effect. These forged, created, and real-but-purchased documents allow the holder appear fully legitimate, and in that sense the documents become true and efficacious. The trick is technique (Taussig 2003:281).

*La Perruque.* One of de Certeau’s classic examples of a tactic is the “perruque.” In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau explains that the perruque is the tactic workers use to disguise their own work or activities as work for the employer. “La perruque may be as simple a matter as a secretary’s writing a love letter on ‘company time’” (de Certeau 1984:25). Like other tactics, perruque tricks the imposed order.

Multiple examples of perruque arose in interviews with workers. Men used company office phones to make long distance phone calls—even to inquire about jobs in other companies. Workers in fabrication yards in Texas would take the opportunity to work on large vessels and pipes away from view of supervisors to catch a post-lunch nap or make a phone call or send a text message on a mobile phone. In fact, I received a number of photo messages of coworkers sleeping, sent from phones not allowed at the worksite. Using the company’s time, infrastructure, and technology was often appropriated by workers for their own means. Some workers even used training—either informal or formal on-the-job—to their own ends. Some learned welding

processes on site and then transferred those skills to establish private businesses, for example making metal railings and decorative items, which sustained them when out of work.

Luis was brazen about how he was able to put one over on the established order.

I'm very restless. I swear, I'm restless, I'm not a calm kind of person. I performed my job as necessary and besides that I did other work, to make money for myself—while on the clock for the company. For example, pretend I arrived to do repair work at another company's worksite, and they'd see that I knew how to do things. They'd pay me for extra work while I was on the clock for my employer. So many times I would arrive and they would ask me to fix a broken air conditioner. "Sure, of course!" I'd fix things and that's how I got money. I did what I was paid to do and then got paid to do more, on the side (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, Aug. 23, 2012).

This extra income allowed him to make ends meet in an underpaying job and to develop an extensive social network for continued and future needs in a volatile industry. Using company time to do his under-the-table work, Luis functioned within the system following the official rules but also turning those rules on end for his benefit.

### **Mobility and Migration**

Diego has been a welder since he was 13 years old. He taught himself to weld and moved alone from his small town in southern Veracruz to Ciudad del Carmen when his children started secondary school. Here, Diego learned to be an industrial welder. Now in his mid-50s, he has lived the industry's ups and downs for decades. He has been able to navigate the booms and busts—times when he may need to tighten his belt, when to look for work in various regions and arenas, when it's time to return home. Although he lived with other H-2B workers when he worked in Louisiana and Texas, he made decisions on his own, moving from place to place on a moment's notice and primarily relying on his past experiences and skills rather than peer groups.

With his skills and experience as a welder in the oil and gas industry throughout the Gulf, Diego was able to navigate with facility across international borders and within industry in the several years following 2005. He worked where there were openings and where they paid him what he perceived as a fair wage, which according to him and other H-2B welders in the area, was nothing below \$25 per hour. I learned, however, that most welders worked for less than \$20 per hour. When I met him he was making big plans to move to New Orleans because a job was supposed to start soon. And he often made weekend trips in his turquoise Dodge Sundance to Matamoros, Mexico, across the border from Brownsville, Texas. As a savvy migrant, Diego employed strategies to make a flawed visa policy work for him. After obtaining several visas for contract work that never manifested or did not fit him, he became tired of coming to the United States and living off savings for several weeks or more. He decided the benefits of using the quasi-real *visa libre* outweighed the costs associated with it: the upfront cost and illegality.

Work throughout the US Gulf of Mexico slowed in July 2008 and Diego wasn't able to find more work, and frankly did not believe it was worth looking because his visa expired in August. When he told me this, I was surprised: it was the first time he admitted to being under the regulations of anything. If he had found a well paying job, he told me, he likely would have stayed past his visa expiration. This was the first time he was a welder and a migrant working within a system of rules and regulations. When industry needed him, he was able to define himself by it. Now in this recent downturn, with both the job market prospects and the H-2B visa regulations pointing him homeward, he preferred to cut his losses.

*Mobility as Tactic to Confront Casualized Labor.* People move internally, from rural areas to cities, and internationally in search of work to earn purchasing power. Uncertainty—both natural and structural—in rural livelihoods is “traded” for urban and industry uncertainties. Casualized labor creates a situation absent of mutual loyalty. When time is finite and a layoff is always on the quickly approaching horizon, what matters is money, not work relationships, not future rapport with companies or supervisors (although supervisor relationships seem to be a higher priority compared to relationships with the company generally, perhaps because supervisors are also mobile and may be able to be help in the future).

While some may submit to the “culture of migration” (Cohen 2004), the choice to become a domestic or international migrant is often made reluctantly, as most workers leave loved ones behind. Thoughtful consideration to enter migrancy, however, was displaced by a tactic of mobility once workers entered the oil and gas and related industries. All the migrants I interviewed were men who were either single or had families who did not live with them. They are the ideal “zero-drag” employee (see Bauman 2007b:9): like a airplane moving frictionless through the air, these workers are unattached to place and obligations. Relationships, friendships, and responsibilities tied to a place both limit a workers’ flexibility—something employers value—and their ability to respond to troubles by picking up and moving on—often a migrant worker’s only resistance tactic.

*Mobility as Response.* Migrating to work, even if within one's home country, can give an individual and family hope of a life beyond when a livelihood at home is unsustainable. Piot (2010) describes this as a nostalgia for the future. Nostalgia is the intense emotion and longing for a time in the past, the halcyon days. But nostalgia for the future is reminiscence for the good

old days, which perhaps never existed in the past but are possible in the future. Mobility and migration expand an individual's geography, but also time. It can give someone a redo on the past, and an opportunity to, perhaps, achieve one's past desires and expectations.

Workers I interviewed came from areas and situations that did not afford them the luxury of attaining their aspirations without leaving, at least for a period of time. Some did not finish their schooling as they had wished, others had difficult family lives, others lived in areas defined by corruption and violence, and still others made mistakes that were not easily made right. These men looked back on the past with resignation, and bitterness, but also with yearning and a resolution that their histories point forward as well as backward.

### **Visa Libre**

Casualized labor creates flexible workers, while they themselves continue to reproduce their flexibility. Mobility facilitates the availability of flexible workers, but this same flexibility, when used for workers' own needs, is a source of frustration for employers. Employers wish to control labor supply, and states attempt to control and manage population. Migrants are both subject to and evade state scrutiny and capitalist discipline (see Ong 2007). Occupying a transnational space, "in which states and corporations often [lack] the will or the power to contain fluid ideas and institutions, energies and populations" (Andrews 2008:92), migrants do not occupy the fixed realm of cartographers and governments.

When I first arrived in Texas in 2008, I met a group of three Mexican welders from Veracruz who told me they were working in Ingleside with a "visa libre." They said a number of their friends and coworkers were also using this visa. A curious and motivated ethnographer, I was eager to find out more about this visa. I also was hesitant to ask too many questions, fearing I

would scare off potential helpful informants. Migrants working in the US are often cautious of questioning strangers, so I first rushed to the Internet, “googling” and searching on the US Citizenship and Immigration Services Web site for more information about the visa libre. It was a fruitless search—I would have to learn from those who used it. I was soon to learn that although the visa libre is not a formal US guestworker visa, it is indeed real to those who improvise its use. Through the months working in Texas, I gained the trust of several migrants who then explained the details of the visa libre.

The visa libre is an example of a coping tactic. It is a tactic of noncompliance—using the H-2B guestworker programs structure—to evade the state and retain power to choose, mold, or at least influence their life course. Some companies will solicit excess visas from the Department of Labor; then sell those visas to workers who intend to use the visa to enter the United States legally with documentation but then work where they choose. This makes them essentially unauthorized immigrants, as the H-2B visa ties the worker to the contracting company. While fees are associated with a work visa, the government does not charge per se for the visa. The actual cost paid by an individual for the visa, however, differs, based on what the worker is planning to do with it. Companies that sell this visa libre [unbound visa] set a price based on supply and demand. During my fieldwork in Texas, they usually charged around \$1,500 to \$2,000.

The H-2B workers who do not stay with their contracting company and choose to search for other work, do so mainly for economic reasons. Contracts for low wages or for work that seems to never begin lead workers to break their contracts with their visa-soliciting company. Other workers may knowingly purchase visas, believing they will be able to work where they choose.

Visa libre workers are H-2B mavericks. H-2B visas allow them to work for several months, return home, and, if contracted again, work the following year.

The visa libre offers migrants a liminal state of legality. They are able to enter the US legally and obtain state-issued identification and driver's licenses, but they are only authorized to work for the company listed on the visa. This does not stop them from attaining well-paying employment, especially in times of severe workforce crises, when industry is begging for skilled craft labor. Their documentation is genuine and their skills are needed—or they will appropriate new skills.

Workers view the visa libre as a way to enter the US job market without adhering to the regulations of the visa to stay with that contracting company. Using a visa libre, workers multiply the jobs and income available to them, while at the same time risking the possibility of deportation and sanctions against future visas. During times of labor demand, the workers I talked with could be characterized by their feelings of independence, confidence, being “beyond the law,” and self-assurance of personal success.

If a job didn't seem to be “working out,” “Alonso” did not become anxious. Changing jobs was not only possible, it was easy and profitable. As an experienced first-class welder, he was needed. And he knew it. He told me that by using the visa libre, he is not an “illegal.” He didn't feel illegal because he did not arrive without documentation, and he was not “trapped” working for a company that may not have work for him. He did not see compliance with the H-2B regulations as necessary for him.

Unlike H-2B workers who stay with their contracting employer, visa libre workers like Alonso and Diego are defined by the *libertad* (freedom) granted them by this visa. They switch

jobs when projects slow down and hours or employees are cut. They fly home or take vacation as they like. They buy and drive cars and are certainly not confined to company housing or one-hour per week trips to the local Walmart, unlike Gulf Coast oil workers who are confined to work camps.

Although illicit, the *visa libre* manifests the agency of migrants. Rather than work in bleak situations, they have recognized the risks and benefits of engaging in an underground system that affords them a liminal status of legality. Few workers will outright explain the insider dealings of the *visa libre*, and industry and community leaders merely express their distaste for the proscribed actions that go into obtaining, selling, or using a *visa libre*.

The guestworker never stops the work of getting and maintaining employment. Some visas are for a mere four months. While the contracting company may apply for an extension, nothing is certain. In fact, with the H-2B visa in the shipbuilding and fabrication industry, nothing is ever certain. Companies do not know if they will need foreign workers, and if they do, they do not know if they will be approved for visas. Workers are not certain if the project they are contracted for will last for the entire time allotted on their visa: if not, they do not know if the company will send them back home, or if they work for a contracting company, if the company will find them another position. When their visa expires and the worker applies for a new visa from home—it is a subjective process—one is never certain if the embassy official will choose to authorize the visa or not.

Mazmanian and Sabatier (1989:137) claim that the decision to comply with a policy is a function of: “(a) the probability that noncompliance will be detected and successfully prosecuted; (b) the sanctions available to penalize noncompliance; (c) target group attitudes concerning the



fundamental legitimacy of the rules; and (d) the costs to target groups of compliance.” Given the low level of oversight of H-2B workers and employers, the time and monetary costs of possibly waiting for work with the contracting employer, and the high rates of pay possible for workers with certain skill sets, noncompliance (e.g., using a visa libre) really is a valid option for these workers.

No one during my fieldwork mentioned “migra raids,” indicating there was little known oversight of foreign workers and noncompliance would likely not be detected. In 2008, visa libre workers were confident that a driver’s license, Social Security card, and checking “US citizen” on a job application was sufficient to avoid noncompliance issues with their H-2B status. Sanctions for working with false authorization were simple: workers found to be working “illegally” can be deported. Workers generally understood that this deportation sanction included a minimum time be spent outside the US before returning. Attitudes regarding the legitimacy of the H-2B program regulations were widely negative. Workers disdained the program’s stipulations that required them to stay with an employer that did not have work for them or did not treat them well. Worker advocates believe the current guestworker schemes, and in particular the H-2B program, invite exploitation (Bauer 2008). Company and industry officials also claim that the “seasonal demand” stipulation of the H-2B is mistakenly tied to an agricultural way of understanding seasonality, and many industries may have seasons that are more related to global demand fluctuations and political and natural climate than yearly seasons. Finally, the cost of compliance for workers is often steep. They risk depleting their savings or going deeply into debt to pay for housing and food while waiting for a job to start. Meanwhile high wages are available elsewhere.

Rather than focusing on the dividing line between legal and illegal—which is quite impossible to identify, the visa libre directs focus to an ambiguous or liminal space, “between life and law” (Reeves 2013:509). This gray space "directs attention from a legal status to a space of relations: from a boundary to a lived place of being ‘in between’” (ibid.:511). Rather than thinking of the dichotomies of legal versus illegal, documented versus undocumented, authorized or not, gray space provides a way of thinking beyond.

The visa libre is gray space, inhabited by workers who use a legal means to enter the US and obtain legal government identification. Visa libre workers in Texas perceived themselves as different from other working migrants who may have entered the US at places other than authorized border entry points and subsequently worked in construction or restaurants. They occupy different space. The structure of the H-2B guestworker program, with US Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) oversight, or lack thereof, provides the structure to make the visa libre possible. The agency designed the structure of the program and its rules and stipulations, thereby creating the spaces for tacticians to act. The custodians of this space, however, are both the migrant workers who use the visa for their livelihoods and those venal labor contractors who benefit economically from each visa libre they sell.

Rather than preparing to work without authorization in the US by hiring a *coyote*, crossing the Rio Grande river in Texas, or the desert in Arizona (and all of the mental and physical preparations associated with that), visa libre workers I met in Texas networked with other workers, applied for a passport, conducted skills testing, and memorized false answers to consulate interview questions. De Certeau (1984:xiv) says a tactician “manipulates the mechanisms of discipline and conforms to them only in order to evade them.” And this is exactly

what visa libre workers do. They conduct all of the right and proper preparations for their H-2B visas, often knowing well in advance that upon arrival in the US they will not follow the visa regulations.

These preparations allow visa libre workers to access the proper channels for “gateway documents” (Srivastava 2012:84). Gateway documents offer a doorway to other forms of identification, which consequently allow the individual to enter other social spaces. In the case of the visa libre workers in Texas in 2008, their passport and H-2B visa allowed them to obtain a Texas drivers license and a Social Security card, and then finally other documents, such as an employee ID, a public library card, and credit card. When the visa libre workers I knew applied for a job, they did so with full confidence their documents would work. They presented their paperwork—application, Social Security card, drivers license—as proper and in order, and it was, albeit in the “gray space” of order. Without the ability to determine “authentic fakes” (see Reeves 2013) from other documents, many employers hired workers whom the ICE would consider unauthorized migrants, although sometimes unknowingly.

When I first learned of the visa libre from workers in Ingleside, I was impressed by the intrepid verve and haughtiness of these men. They saw the world as their oyster—opportunities for work abounded. They were drunk with the possibility of high wages, large per diems, and demand for their labor. The stipulations of their employment and authorization in the US were inconsequential to them. In an environment of labor shortages and a seeming boom in the oil industry, oversight was minimal. They created their own rules. Moving from one state to another for an even slight wage increase was less a risk than an adventure. In the small chance that a job

did not work out, they moved on and found something else. Gushers of ambition revealed short-term rewards, but that's all they were looking for.

Little did these workers know that the visa libre bubble was about to burst, as I was entering the field in 2008. Legislation in 2007 reinstated the cap of 66,000 total H-2B visas each year, discontinuing the H2-R status of returning workers not counting against the cap. Simultaneously, the economy had begun to slide into a recession, causing a decreased need for imported workers. Suddenly they discovered—perhaps again, but they had forgotten since the boom accompanying the 2005 hurricanes—limbo. Abruptly, there was no further demand for their skills. Rather than open arms and attractive contracts, they were met by locked and gated fabrication yards. Alone, without the rules for how to move on, and wading through a shapeless time that before had been a source of excitement and challenge, they discovered failure (see Sennett 2006:26-27).

## Social Networks

*Nice work if you can get it,  
And if you get it --  
Won't you tell me how?*

—George Gershwin, “Nice Work If You Can Get It”

*Importance of Noneconomic Relationships.* Marco conveyed how he and a fellow unemployed man tried to remain afloat in Ciudad del Carmen without an income. Even a seemingly unimportant activity as a haircut or a home-cooked dinner can carry significant meaning.

Yesterday I went to see a guy I met. He doesn't have any work either and he was in bad need of a haircut—it was ugly, long, really a mess. I told him, “I can cut your hair.” “Really?” “Sure,” I said, “I even have my trimmer and everything. I can do it tomorrow, but I can't in the *literas* where I'm staying.” A friend of his who works the night shift was renting a room in one of the *colonias* near the park and told him that he could borrow it: “sure, stay in my room and even cook something if you want, I'll leave you 100 pesos to buy some ingredients and you can cook.” So I helped him cook, cut his hair, and then we ate a home-cooked meal—something we both had really missed. And he looked so much more presentable to show up at companies with his curriculum and application. But we finished around midnight and since it's dangerous to be out in that area of the island at night, I needed to take a taxi. But I didn't have money. I told him, “You know, I don't have enough to pay for a taxi, could you loan me 10 pesos?” He loaned me the money and we both finished the evening happy. I tell you, here that's how we have to do it. We have to survive somehow. I didn't charge him for the haircut, and we ate well, thanks to his friend whom I've never met. We took care of each other even though we just met.

Social networks in the oil industry are diffuse, spanning borders and oceans. Platforms and yards are worksites for employees from all over the globe: Mexican and US citizens but also Venezuelans, Scots, Norwegians, Chinese, Filipinos, among others. Networks are also weak. The nature of the oil industry creates a large, disperse workforce network. Labor casualization means that workers do not spend a lifetime at one company and, thus, over the course of their worklives, individuals amass many coworkers and supervisors. Making a living is a complex process involving contractual and noncontractual, productive and reproductive, activities. Each

of these activities, from obtaining a contract to helping with childcare or loaning a neighbor money, is conditioned by cultural factors (Spyridakis 2013:6-7). Disperse networks and weak links between people are the norm in the oil industry, and workers appropriate the networks to their own means to cope.

*Strong and Weak Ties.* Family and close friends comprise an individual's close network. These close, strong ties exist on a long temporal scale. They are usually insulated—those within the network, nodes in network-speak, are connected to the same nodes. Smith explains the effect of close ties in work networks: “Individual member's acquaintances and contacts may lack jobs and the jobs they do hold frequently are transitory or dead-end, thus providing limited bridges to jobs or mobility” (Smith 2010:290). Some, (see Benner et al., 2007) believe that those with low levels of social connectedness suffer from their inadequate networks and turn to formal institutions such as labor intermediaries. Weak ties, however, are useful.

Granovetter (1973) claims that modern institutional networks, like the oil industry, are marked by the strength of weak ties. The fleeting forms of association, he claims, are more useful to people than long-term associations. Diffuse networks with weak ties can reach many more people. If you tell a joke to your close friends and they do the same, it's likely that many will hear the same joke several times, because nodes with strong ties often share common nodes. The importance and benefit of weak ties is that they incorporate more nodes through shorter paths.

*Engaging Weak Ties.* Indirect contacts, such as past coworkers, allow individuals to stretch beyond their circle of friends. Old school friends, former employers, and the like—those with whom initial contact may have not been strong—are included among those with whom sporadic

contact proves beneficial. Individuals I interviewed were eager to talk about friends on the yard or offshore platforms. Migrant relationships at the worksite are unusually intense—workers are often with each other 24 hours a day, yet when the contract is finished, they disperse.

The relationship of a young welder from Veracruz and his two middle-aged coworkers, both from Veracruz, is a good example. They would eat together for nearly every meal and two of them shared a room in a motel for several months. Upon their return to Mexico, the young welder was surprised that the two other men did not call to say Merry Christmas or for the New Year. When they did call, they called to see if he had heard anything about the visa situation or if he had money to loan for a hardship. The network is utility-driven, not emotional.

Chance meetings with past coworkers in the plaza, at a restaurant, or waiting in line for a job interview can reactivate ties, and it is astounding the amount of important information transferred in these chance meetings with people whose very existence they may have forgotten.”

When a man changes jobs, he is not only moving from one network of ties to another, but also establishing a link between these. Such a link is often of the same kind which facilitated his own movement. Especially within professional and technical specialties which are well defined and limited in size, this mobility sets up elaborate structures of bridging weak ties between the more coherent clusters that constitute operative networks in particular locations. Information and ideas thus flow more easily through the specialty, giving it some “sense of community,” activated at meetings and conventions. Maintenance of weak ties may well be the most important consequence of such meetings (Granovetter:1373).

Pablo’s example shows how weak ties function. Using the tactic of activating social networks created in a casualized labor framework, Pablo was able to help his brother-in-law get a job.

I went with my brother-in-law to a company where I had worked before. An engineer works there, with whom I had worked in the good ol’ days, about 26 or 28 years ago. I worked there, and I met the engineer who still works there. I went up to this engineer because we were coworkers. He was my boss and he’s from Poza Rica, close to my hometown. We had more or less a good working relationship. So I dared to go up to him and ask him...see, it was by

happenstance. I had thought of asking him for a job, I told my brother-in-law, “Let’s go see an engineer I knew.” We went to the company and I happened to see him get out of this truck and I said, “Engineer Santa Cruz!” he turned to me and I said, “Hi! How are you, what’s up? What have you been up to?” But he didn’t even recognize me. He just greeted me out of politeness, not because he remembered me. I said, “Do you remember me?” “I recognize your face,” he said, “you seem familiar but I don’t remember you.” I said, “I’m Pablo. When this company had a different name, you and I worked together. A long time ago.” He said, “Ah yes, a long time ago! What are you up to?” I told him I was looking for work. I introduced him to my brother-in-law, a safety engineer. “Ah! He’s an engineer! Wait a moment!” he said. He went inside; when he came out he told my brother-in-law that he could go in and interview for a position he needed to fill.

Although he had not seen his former boss in decades, their good working relationship and continued involvement in the same industry helped Pablo’s brother-in-law get a job. Had Pablo not exploited his diffuse network or had he worked only one job over his entire career, he would have been less likely to locate someone in a hiring position whom he knew and had worked with.

### **So-Called Traditional Livelihoods**

Workers in the oil industry have learned to be flexible with their work arrangements, their schedules, and job expectations. Individuals who come from rural areas, who maintain a degree of “traditional livelihood” seem well equipped to deal with this forced flexibility. Indeed, some individuals and families choose to enter contract employment arrangements to maintain livelihoods, such as agriculture and fishing. McGuire and Gardner (2003) and Austin (2006) found that in the early days of oil in Louisiana, so-called traditional livelihoods were used to cope with the volatility of the oil industry. They functioned as a buffer or safety net for the undependable employment in the oil sector (McGuire and Gardner 2003:218). The opposite is true for some individuals who work for contracted positions in Ciudad del Carmen.

Many migrant workers in the oil industry navigate what one may describe as a multiplicity of identities. They work offshore when they can, make ends meet through a variety of means, and



are family breadwinners when possible. Of the 39 interviews with precarious workers (unemployed searching for work, contract employed, and H-2B employed), over half (n=20) had connections to agriculture or fishing. Some returned to farmlands or ranches between stints offshore, others helped family with farming or fishing when needed. Only three of the men I interviewed were entirely dependent upon agriculture or fishing for their livelihoods.

While the uncertainty of the oil industry is something many would consider negative for labor, some workers wholeheartedly embrace this employment model (Smith 2010:294-295).

workers unabashedly reject permanent jobs, choosing to work in the world of contracting precisely because it affords them lateral and vertical mobility: remaining employable is part and parcel of their occupational culture. But whether one feels oppressed by and anxious about the need to remain employable or is enthusiastic about and animated by it, across the board workers are encouraged to internalize more individualistic notions about their employment prospects and to devote labor to maximizing them.

Such is the case for farmers and fisherman in the areas surrounding Ciudad del Carmen, particularly rural areas of Campeche, Tabasco, and Veracruz.

Halperin's analytical concept of the "Kentucky Way" (1990:3-4) adequately explains how individuals maintain ties to family, land, livelihood, and culture in areas and activities that are at once rural and urban, formal and informal. Moreover, they maintain family and community bonds over great distances and despite uncommon work schedules. Employing a mixture of means to make ends meet, individuals, families, and communities are able to feel autonomous, resist dependency upon capitalism, and continue ways of life otherwise not so viable.

*Multiple Livelihoods.* In a context of complex and changing situations, individuals who wish to continue their rural livelihoods to any degree devise modes of livelihood that are a mix of economic institutions (ibid.:20). Changes in ejido structures, neoliberal reform, and highly fluctuating commodity prices have made making a living from the land (or water for fishing

families) difficult in Mexico. Some individuals and families, however, have learned to take advantage of the employment structure of the oil industry to their benefit.

Families in Mexico's Gulf Coast area may choose to have certain family members obtain work experience and skills in the oil industry. While part of the family, especially women and the elderly, hold on to the land, able-bodied young men may travel to Ciudad del Carmen to obtain contract work during times of financial need. This is not done for the young generation to establish a long-term career in the industry. Indeed, this would be difficult to do, as work life in the oil industry is punctuated by periods of unemployment. Those who find work in companies will work their *subida*, return home to help with farming tasks or fishing, and then return to go offshore—if possible and necessary. The goal is to sustain the family and community network.

By incorporating the wage labor of offshore work with agrarian economies rural families are able to generate cash income to make purchases or improvements on their homes and land. Temporary workers in the oil industry from agricultural or fishing families use contract work as a tactic to help out in tough times, supplement family income, or generate capital for investment into new ventures at home.

José worked as a *maniobrista* in the Ciudad del Carmen zone for years, since he deserted the army at the eruption of the Zapatista movement in 1994. As we talked about his jobs, I noticed there were long lapses in his employment, sometimes up to a year or more, and asked what he did between jobs. He answered, “No, I didn’t do anything.” For a while he would say the same thing, until I pressed a little more. “No, I didn’t do anything. I just, well you know, my parents have land so I worked there—I took care of the livestock, the crops. But I didn’t work I just helped them” [for 18 months]. His family has land around the small town of Emiliana Zapata,

Campeche. He would often help his family when his contract was terminated or when he decided to not work offshore for a while. "I just quit going offshore. I quit platform work because it's stressful. So much stress. And they needed my help with some crops." When he goes home he is able to relieve some stress by being with family and being on the land (Interview, Ciudad del Carmen, April 5, 2012). His position within his family and in the oil industry were mutually beneficial. When he was laid off, he knew he could return to his family's land, help with crops, be a valued and helpful member of the family, and have a place to stay and food to eat. Likewise, the same suite of benefits was available to him when working offshore got to be too much.

*Rural Campeche.*

Earlier this morning I rode a motorcycle with one of they guys to a highpoint in the ejido where it was known you could get cell phone service. I climbed a tree and sent Mom and Dad a message that I would be out of contact for a couple days. This place is isolated! The Telcel commercial that says "*Todo México el Telcel Territorio*" (All of Mexico is Telcel Territory) is wrong. We rode four abreast in Josue's maroon Ford pickup along the rutted dirt road from Miguel Hidalgo to Estrella del Sur. From Estrella del Sur you could easily get lost walking through the small farms and find yourself in Guatemala

Gonzalo had promised to go hunting early in the morning to celebrate me coming to visit them. They were all excited about the prospect of fresh venison, and despite them saying they would do it for me, they needed to feel unruffled after not getting contracted in Ciudad del Carmen. We went to Gonzalo's home, an unpainted block building with a *techo de paja* (palm frond) roof, but he wasn't there. We decided to go to his parents' home and wait for him. Within minutes he came striding over a hill, whistling and quite joyous, with a small deer slung over his shoulders and eight boney, hungry dogs at his feet. The four men drank tequila and butchered the deer as their wives prepared the outside kitchen for cooking, brought out an clay bean pot, and finally cut down the meat into smaller, more usable pieces (Fieldnotes, Miguel Hidalgo, Campeche, April 19, 2012).

When I met Gonzalo and his friends in Ciudad del Carmen, they seemed interested in working offshore, but not desperate to do so. Although they would have liked to have been contracted for a stint of offshore work, they were not despondent. They had homes and family

and work to return to. Each of the four had reasons they were looking to supplement their rural livelihoods with offshore work. Gonzalo wanted to be able to finish furnishing his house.

“Sergio,” a 19-year-old, has recently helped out with the conversion of his family’s land to palm oil trees. He wanted to repair and paint his crashed pickup truck. “David,” a 26-year-old with a newborn and the only of the quartet with any schooling, was hoping to work several subidas to supplement his income at his father’s butcher shop. He wanted to put a concrete roof on his house. “Josue” was just along for the ride.

Sergio, Gonzalo, and Josue’s livelihoods were land-based and might be called traditional. Much of the protein they ate came from chickens and pigs they raised, fish they caught, and deer they hunted. Among the outbuildings at Josue’s house is a grain mill. Women from the area bring their *nixtamal* (limewater-soaked corn for tortillas) to the mill to be ground and a pay a small fee, which supplements the family’s income.

Many of the families in the area have transitioned from growing a variety of food and feed crops to growing palm oil trees. Inserting cash income from offshore oil stints allows for such investment. It also provides capital to set up and support other income-generating businesses, such as Gonzalo’s wife’s *papelería* (stationary and school supply shop), small clothing ventures run out of David’s mom’s porch, and Josue’s sisters’ and mother’s grain mill.

Unlike the other job seekers I met in the Plaza de Lamentos who were from urban areas, these men and their families from southern Campeche were not disheartened in their search for work. Caballo’s wife told me she depended on her husband’s parents for help with the animals when Caballo was working offshore. His offshore income helped pay for the children’s clothes and school supplies, the Coca Cola they liked drink with their meals, and fuel. But they were not

impoverished when he was not called to go offshore for any length of time. Rooting themselves in the land and only searching for cash income as needed allowed them to only commodify their labor as needed.

Other workers, with fewer options for livelihood, were more distressed. They were forced to promote themselves as an attractive and desirable commodity, and at every chance they looked to enhance the market value of the goods–themselves–that they were selling. “They are, at the same time, the merchandise and their marketing agents, the goods and their traveling salespeople” (Bauman 2007b:6). But those only partially supplementing their agricultural-based livelihoods with offshore oil work did not have to promote themselves as commodities. They did not subscribe to the idea that they need the goods so strongly marketed.

It is evident, however, that this is changing. Palm oil trees now occupy much of the area where the community had once cultivated a large variety of food for consumption. They will now have to sell the palm oil and use that income to purchase basic foods. The younger generation is tempted, through social media, the Internet, and movies, by life beyond the ejido. Sergio has mentioned several times that he may forego trying to work offshore or continue with the family agricultural ventures and migrate to the US *de mojado* (i.e., without authorization).

## Chapter 7: Tempest Toss'd: Oil Industry Labor, Extreme Weather, and Climate Change

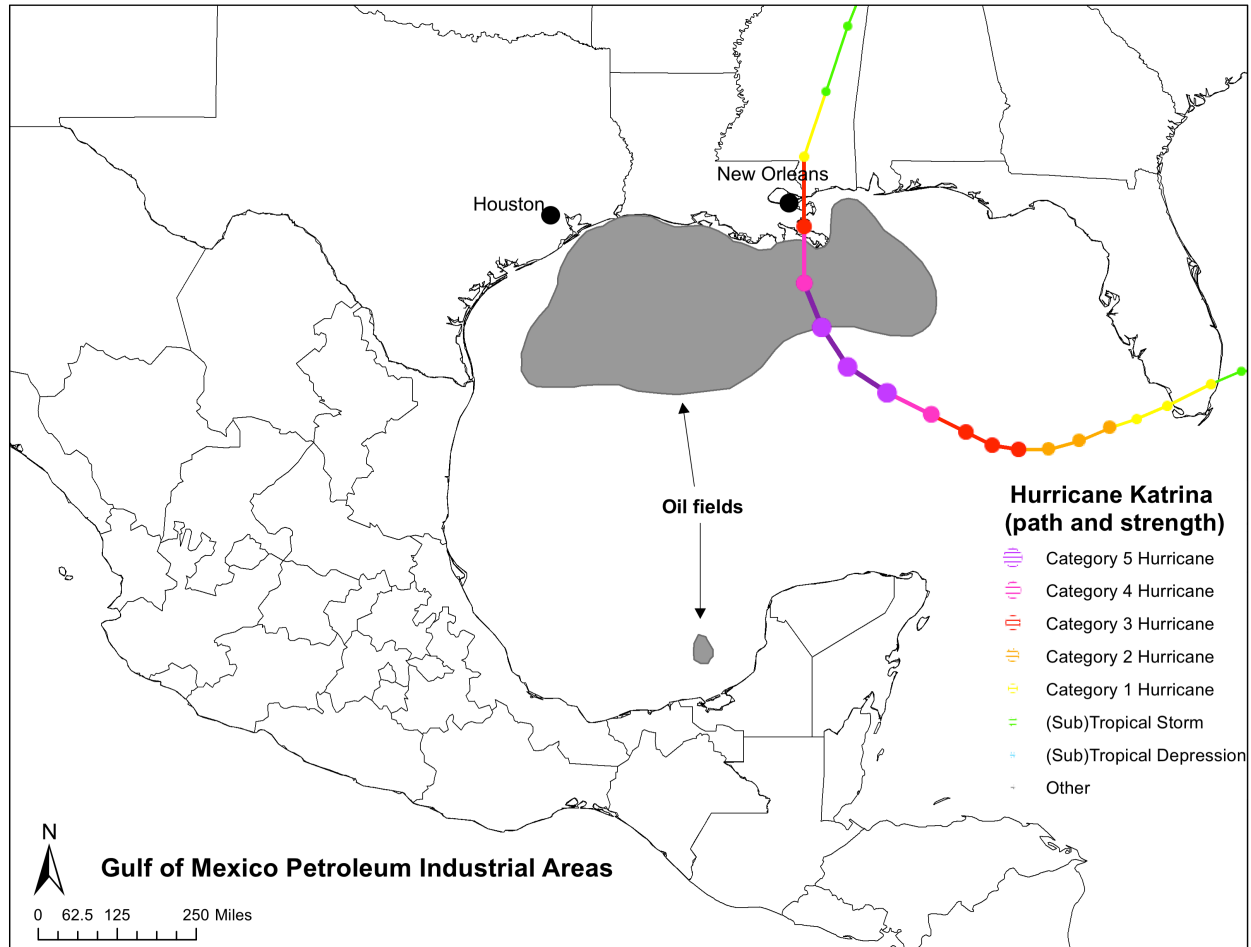
*The results of embracing the rationality of essentially short-term gain have been unprecedented extremes of material wealth and poverty, unprecedented levels of environmental destruction, and the rapid amplification of socially constructed vulnerability.*

Anthony Oliver-Smith,  
"Theorizing Vulnerability in a Globalized World"

### Hurricane Katrina

On August 25, 2005, less than two hours before Katrina made its first landfall on the east coast of Florida, it reached hurricane strength. After crossing Florida, making a wide swath as a Category 1 hurricane, Katrina began to gain strength, eventually increasing to a Category 5. It made landfall on August 29, 2005, near Buras, Louisiana—about 60 miles southeast of New Orleans—as a Category 3 storm. Even as Katrina weakened, the storm remained extremely large.

In carving through the Gulf of Mexico, Katrina left a path of catastrophic damage and loss of life. Katrina was not merely extremely powerful and large. Katrina's trajectory, through offshore oil fields and densely populated areas, proved it to be a destructive hurricane, a deadly hurricane. By September 5, destruction of homes and businesses prompted the displacement of 229,338 residents of the Gulf Coast. The sheer size of the powerful hurricane meant the damage and loss of life inflicted by Katrina was experienced not only in Louisiana and Mississippi, but also in Florida, Georgia, and Alabama (Knabb et al. 2005:1). Katrina was indeed one of the most costly, deadly, and devastating natural disasters in the history of the United States. Devastation covered 90,000 square miles of the Gulf Coast; more than 1,800 people died; in New Orleans alone 182,000 homes were destroyed or damaged (Solnit 2010).



**Map 3: Hurricane Katrina's Trajectory.**  
**Map created by Andrés Lira Noriega, 2014.**

Katrina immediately disrupted hundreds of thousands of peoples' lives, residents who were forced to evacuate their homes and leave their jobs—if their workplace was not annihilated. But the hurricane also caused long-term social and economic disruptions, not only at the local scale but also at national and global scales (Hanson et al. 2010:90). Physical damage occurred both onshore and offshore. The media's gaze was tuned to blatant issues: the hundreds of thousands of displaced people, the inadequacies of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA),

crimes such as looting, the impact of poverty on individuals' ability to respond and recover, and race. Yet outside the media's spotlight, the massive oil and gas industry reeled in reaction to severely damaged pipelines, refineries, and platforms, causing economic jolts felt by the entire nation (Petterson et al. 2006:648).

Katrina hit the heart of the US energy system. The area affected most profoundly, southeast Louisiana, accounts for nearly 30 percent of total domestic crude and 20 percent of domestic natural gas production (Johnson 2006:4). Katrina crippled pipelines, flooded refineries, and damaged or capsized platforms. As Katrina approached the coast, it barreled through an area with over 2,900 offshore oil platforms (Petterson et al. 2006:648), directly impacting 2,100 platforms and over 15,000 miles of pipelines. Although federal officials testified that platforms were designed to withstand Category 5 waves and winds, they did not. With over 115 lost platforms and another 52 seriously damaged, over 90 percent of Gulf of Mexico oil production came to a halt following Katrina (ibid.). This shutdown, lasting from August 26, 2005, to May 3, 2006, cost the equivalent of 28 percent of the Gulf of Mexico's total annual production, 547.5 million barrels, or \$38 billion at a market price of \$70 per barrel (ibid.). These figures do not account for losses associated with increased crude importation or refinery shutdowns.

The evacuation of people living in affected areas and continued displacement of residents over an extended time, some never to return, created a workforce vacuum when one of the nation's oil and gas epicenters was incapacitated. The energy industry was in dire need of repair and few were left to fix it. But labor issues rarely dazzle the media. Consumers of media have come to expect horrifying and sensational stories, and media coverage of the aftermath of Katrina rose to the challenge. The media strained under the complexity and scale of the issues



experienced in Katrina's wake and ultimately stoked an atmosphere of fear and hostility.

Maureen Dowd (2005), of the New York Times, described the scene as a "snake pit of anarchy, death, looting, raping, marauding thugs, suffering innocents, a shattered infrastructure, a gutted police force, insufficient troop levels and criminally negligent government planning."

### **Focusing Events**

Sudden, unpredictable, catastrophic events, like Hurricane Katrina—which was described by Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff as an "ultra-catastrophe" (CBS Face the Nation 2005)—can become "focusing events" in policy and agenda setting. According to Birkland (1997:22), a potential focusing event is a relatively rare, sudden event that is "defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, inflicts harms or suggests potential harms." These harms are often known by policy makers and the public simultaneously. Katrina fulfills all of Birkland's criteria (ibid.:23-26) for being a focusing event: 1) Katrina was *sudden* and happened with little warning; 2) the impact and scale of Katrina was *rare*; few previous hurricanes were as destructive or deadly; 3) Katrina affected a *large number of people*; 4) the *public and policy community* learned of Katrina's impacts simultaneously.

All eyes were on New Orleans during the last days of August 2005, as the city and region suffered and then later worked to recover from Katrina's impacts. The media is drawn to drama and novelty, and a focusing event like Katrina is toothsome to the media: it is rare, unanticipated, and injurious. Elements that prompt media to cover an event (and subsequently its aftermath) are: 1) the scope of the event: the number of people affected and the location, especially in respect to journalists easily being able to cover it; 2) highly visible and tangible harms that are easily photographed or filmed; 3) rarity: the drama and symbolism generated by a first event of

the kind is rarely replicated if followed shortly after by even an equally disastrous event.

Katrina's impact was extreme, including statistics that are difficult to fathom: nearly 100 percent of New Orleans residents were unemployed directly after the storm. Southern Louisiana lost nearly 39 percent of its workforce in 2005 (Pettersen et al. 2006:656). Ultimately, Katrina displaced 1.5 million people (ibid.:649). Hurricane Rita, which hit the Gulf Coast only weeks after Katrina, was an extremely powerful and destructive storm as well, but it did not receive the sustained media coverage and study that Katrina receives even to this day.

Prone to emphasize the spectacular and horrific and move on to another sensational topic, the media glossed over the extended impact Katrina had on labor dynamics in the Gulf Coast. Disasters expose existing problems in the affected society. For a focusing event to result in a search for new solutions, special interest groups, legislators, and media must place renewed and greater attention on "existing but dormant" problems (Birkland 1997:22). And although a Louisiana shipyard comptroller said, when explaining the extreme post-Katrina labor demand, "Katrina blew the top off of all of this, revealing it to the world" (Interview, Patterson, La., July 18, 2007), the reach and exposure of labor problems to a broad audience were inadequate. The post-Katrina labor impacts did not receive the coverage and attention necessary to cause changes in labor policy. Identities and norms were not challenged, which may have an increasing impact with natural disasters to come.

### Natural Disasters

It is important to study disasters like Katrina, even if they do not receive focused attention and result in subsequent policy changes. Disasters, Anthony Oliver-Smith (2002:5:10) says, play the role of a "canary in a mine for all humankind." Oliver-Smith defines a disaster as a process

or event that combines potentially destructive forces from the “natural, modified, or built environment and a population in a socially and economically produced condition of vulnerability, resulting in a perceived disruption of the customary relative satisfaction of individual and social needs for physical survival, social order, and meaning” (ibid:4). In inflicting physical and material damage, disasters expose social structures as the flows of material goods, services, and labor becomes critical.

Disasters have the unique ability to reveal the connections between local-level experiences and larger-scale structures and processes, including phenomena that are at once social and natural. “Frozen into the dichotomy between the natural and social sciences” (ibid:40), disasters not only allow but require inter- and transdisciplinary thinking.

Hurricanes have awed and inspired humans for centuries. The Maya revered a storm god called Hunraken, from whom the word hurricane comes. Respect and fear of hurricanes have begat literary works by the likes of William Shakespeare and Joseph Conrad and numerous other artwork. Few things in nature can truly compare to the destructive power of a hurricane, for that reason it is called the greatest storm on Earth (Graham and Riebeek 2006)

Yet despite centuries of experience with hurricanes, little, until quite recently, was understood about them, or, for that matter storms in general. Hurricanes can harm individuals and society in four basic ways: storm surge, winds, heavy rains, and tornadoes (Mooney 2007). Storm surge, the rise of water level associated with a storm, is the deadliest aspect of a hurricane. Winds can tear down trees and poles. Heavy rains can cause catastrophic flooding. Tornadoes can spawn as a storm makes landfall, especially in the Gulf of Mexico, where hurricanes lead with a

powerful right quadrant (ibid). But much remains mysterious about their formation, inner workings, trajectories, and potential power.

To better understand the impact of hurricanes on oil labor in the Gulf of Mexico, it is helpful to understand how oil development has been impacted by hurricanes. Already a relationship fraught with challenges, hurricanes and oil developers, workers, and the communities that serve them will clash.

Hurricanes pose a threat to all that lies in their path, potentially killing humans, eroding coastal areas, flooding entire cities, and compromising structures designed with seemingly adequate foresight. Even with increased weather forecasting capabilities, these so-called extreme events are highly unpredictable. But there's oil beneath the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, and the desire for cheap energy pushes the oil industry to explore increasingly deeper waters, an added variable in the complex relationship between oil production and hurricanes.

### **History and Chronology of Hurricanes, Oil, and the Gulf of Mexico**

Oliver-Smith (2002:45) says that “societies and nature have always been in a process of coevolution in local, relatively discrete contexts.” So it is with the offshore oil industry. As the oil industry inched further offshore, each time a hurricane hit, engineers, managers, and manual laborers learned more about the forces necessary to withstand it if they were to operate in their paths.

In 1902, the famous gusher Spindletop in the “golden triangle” east of Houston, Texas, marked the beginning of the oil rush in the Gulf of Mexico region. Even onshore developments were at risk of destruction during hurricane season, which is June through November. Despite weather dangers to coastal areas—winds from 74 mph (Category 1) to over 155 mph (Category 5),

storm surge, and numerous tornadoes at landfall—onshore oil entrepreneurs knew more or less what to expect. But in the years around World War II, oil exploration inched closer and closer to the waters of the Gulf. According to oil industry historian Joseph Pratt (2008:7), when the oil industry moved offshore into the Gulf of Mexico after World War II, it “plunged into an ocean of ignorance. Little was known about conditions in the Gulf....And out there beyond the horizon loomed an engineer’s nightmare, the extreme, unpredictable conditions generated by hurricanes.”

Very little was known about wind speeds, wave heights, or soil compositions offshore. Measurements and subsequent predictions could be made, but only after the fact. A host of questions—regarding wind force, waves, and ocean floor stability—could only be answered by collection of data on equipment in the Gulf of Mexico during a hurricane. These questions were to be answered, little by little, through research, failure, and luck. Over a half a century later, it is evident that offshore oil is profitable. Around World War II, however, it was up for debate – lacking weather information and rudimentary technology, the investment and potential for failure was high.

**Table 3: Hurricanes that have impacted the offshore oil industry.**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Summary Effects</b>
Not Named	Sept. 3-4, 1948	Heavy damage to oil rigs and other equipment offshore at Grand Isle, La. No deaths
Flossy	Sept. 24, 1956	First “hurricane test.” Drilling rigs and wells shut down. Extensive coastal erosion at Grand Isle, La. Fifteen killed and \$22 million in damage.
Audrey	June 27, 1957	Oil company reported 150 mph winds. Waves associated with the storm were 45 to 50 ft.
Hilda	Oct. 3, 1964	Severe coastal erosion and flooding, with 39 deaths. Offshore 100 miles south of Morgan City, La., winds measured 120 mph for two days, waves over 50 ft. high. Damage totaled \$53 million.
Betsy	Oct. 9, 1965	Hundreds of ships were sunk or beached, from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. Offshore and coastal oil installations reported unparalleled damage.
Camille	Aug. 18, 1969	Almost total destruction from Venice, La., to Buras, La.

Sources: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2009; Roth 2009

*Early offshore to mid-1960s: a time favorable for testing the waters.* Timing and the particularities of the Gulf of Mexico continental shelf favored these early industrialists. The floor of the Gulf slopes very gently out, providing a training ground for the offshore industry.

Companies could develop technology and gradually pursue greater depths as the Gulf goes for hundreds of miles in sections before reaching 300 feet (Pratt 2008). Additionally, the early development of offshore technology in the Gulf of Mexico coincided with two decades with no major hurricanes (from the first offshore well in 1945 to the mid-1960s). During this time they were able to measure offshore wind and waves, which were much different than measurements taken on seawalls. Additionally, these years witnessed improvements in transportation, communication, meteorological knowledge, and technology from military technological advancements and surplus vessels, such as Landing Ship Tanks (LSTs), which were gutted and used as service vessels alongside mobile platforms.

Between the placement of the first producing oil well “out of sight of land” in 1945 and the first major hurricanes to hit the Gulf of Mexico after the rush to offshore oil, there was much debate regarding the engineering specifications needed to withstand hurricane-strength winds and waves. Most companies followed the suggestions of two retired naval officers turned consultants, F.R. Harris and H.G. Knox, who publicized widely that waves would “probably seldom, if ever, exceed 20 feet in height” in 100 feet of water (ibid:13). Therefore, many companies designed their platforms with decks between 26 and 33 feet, high enough, they thought, to escape any 25-year storm that would come their way.

*September 3-4, 1948, Hurricane.* The September 3, 1948, hurricane developed quickly in the Gulf, giving the oil industry insufficient time to develop an evacuation plan. The hurricane headed toward the operations of the California Company’s operations, where 50 men were in a converted LST being towed to safety (these gigantic ships were stripped of everything, including their engines, so they had to be towed). The tug was unable to haul in the LST, so it cut the lines

and went to shore alone, leaving the men to rock about on rough seas (ibid.). Although there was no loss of life, this incident was seen as a call to increase safety standards offshore. In addition to increasing deck height, companies began thinking of placing wave-measuring equipment on the platforms. Prior to this, all design and engineering was done based on theory, not actual measurements (ibid.:15).

*Flossy, 1956.* Although neither strong nor large, Flossy was labeled the “first real hurricane test” for offshore operations (ibid.:17). Flossy had sustained 107 mph winds (Longshore 1998:131) and was the first hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico to significantly affect on oil and gas production in the Gulf. Production shut down for days, and there was minor damage to platforms (Keim and Muller 2009:139). Several hundred oil-producing wells shut down and many drilling rigs did not work for several days (Pratt 2008:17). Evacuation plans were still inadequate—and again nearly 50 workers rode out the storm. And companies reported problems with pipelines, mooring chains, and risers. But the industry stressed “the effectiveness of existing designs and safety procedures....The greatest fears of the offshore oil operators have been dispelled by the arrival of Flossy” (ibid.:18). They had just experienced a storm that was not half the strength of what was to come.

*Audrey, 1957.* Classified as a Category 4 hurricane, Audrey is remembered as one of the deadliest hurricanes in US history, with 400-500 deaths, over 90 percent of whom were black (Longshore 1998:21). Many residents, like Norman McCall, believed they did not receive adequate warning that Audrey was closing in:

That’s why so many people drowned in Hurricane Audrey. The weather reports indicated that the storm was not gonna hit till late afternoon of the 27<sup>th</sup>, at the earliest. Most people, including myself, decided to stay and take a look at it the next morning, thinking that we’d have ample time to move into the Lake Charles



area or somewhere else if it was still coming. But before daylight on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the storm hit. It hit during the night. We didn't have ample warning. We didn't have the warning systems that we have today (UH-Houston History Project 2007).

What notice there was of Audrey's development was received with relative inaction by some, until reports of nine deaths in a workboat that capsized when evacuating an offshore drilling rig's personnel. Jake Giroir (UH-Houston History Project 2001), a long-time resident and employee in the oil industry, said, "That storm came up like that, and people didn't think it was going to be a storm. It started in the Gulf of Mexico, right off of Mexico, and it come up and just got bigger and bigger, and people wouldn't move."

The storm quickly made landfall at Cameron, Louisiana, catching its residents apathetically waiting out a storm they had expected to be much weaker. One drilling rig sank, but other than that, the oil industry fared much better than the coastal communities. Many believed, like John Estes, an engineer, that the devastation in coastal populated areas was not due to such a large powerful hurricane, but rather to human blunder and inaction: "That was not—you can't say it wasn't a major hurricane. Well, it was a major screw up. That was not a 200-year storm or anything like that. Offshore it was not as bad as it was in-shore.... But as far as being catastrophic to offshore, it wasn't" (UH-Houston History Project 2008).

As the industry moved deeper and deeper offshore, the stakes increased. Technological advancements made drilling in deeper water possible but more expensive; therefore, there was a greater investment to lose in an extreme storm. The years 1964 through 1969 brought three storms stronger and more destructive than the Gulf had experienced in many years.

*Hilda, 1964.* A Category 3 storm, Hilda made landfall after progressively weakening as it approached the Louisiana shore, east of Marsh Island (Longshore 1998:166). Although not any larger than previous post-World War II hurricanes, Hilda caused much more damage to the

offshore industry. Two thousand workers in the offshore oil and gas fields were evacuated (Keim and Muller 2009:139). As it lost speed, it moved slowly through offshore facilities, leaving damages valued at more than \$350 million. Thirteen platforms were destroyed and five others were damaged. “Hilda had delivered a jolt of reality to an industry grown complacent about the power of major hurricanes” (Pratt 2008:20).

*Betsy, 1965.* “Betsy, actually...was a more devastating storm to the patch because it went through what was then a larger accumulation of platforms” (UH-Houston History Project 1998). At the time, “Billion Dollar Betsy” was the costliest hurricane in the United States (Keim and Muller 2009:84). After passing through Florida, Betsy made its second landfall at Grand Isle, Louisiana, where it destroyed most structures. In its path lay more than \$2 billion in offshore investments. Betsy destroyed eight platforms and damaged more. Symbolic of the unpredictable dangers of hurricanes was the ill-fated Maverick platform, a new, state-of-the-art jack-up rig: when Betsy struck, Maverick simply disappeared (Pratt 2008:21).

Betsy allowed engineers and others in the industry to better understand the impact of big hurricanes on platforms. By measuring and gathering data from the platforms, they were able to better predict future impacts. According to an engineer at the time,

Hurricane Betsy in 1965 was a real revelation to a whole lot of the industry because the wave heights — they did a lot of what you would call “hindcasting” — going back and looking and seeing what the wave heights had to have been to create some of the damage they have and equate it to the known wind velocities and the data they had. And they came up with a whole new set of calculations about what you needed (UH-Houston History Project 2003).

Major companies, however, were not able to just scratch everything they already had in the Gulf. Retrofitting rigs based on new information about resistant structures became commonplace, as the aforementioned engineer explained:

We already had 100 platforms out in the Gulf that were designed not where they would be likely to last. And surprisingly, more of them stayed up than you might have anticipated, but we did have to change our design substantially after Betsy. We just had so many already in, we actually went back on some and essentially put crutches on them. We put platform structures, tripod structures at either end of the platform to help support and give added support to some of those (ibid.)

In fact, not only were companies deciding to make safer, sturdier structures offshore, Betsy prompted building regulations, as a longtime resident said,

The dramatic changes were brought about, um, devastation of Hurricane Betsy with new regulations for building and the hurricane seasons, one after another have changed our, our building codes. Yeah, natural disasters brought drastic change (UH-Houston History Project 2005).

People began to realize with this event that these high-impact, expensive disasters were not merely an individual or community experience or a burden of risk for companies to deal with.

All levels of government had a vested interest in maintaining the safety of citizens and the continued output of oil production in the Gulf of Mexico.

*Camille, 1969.* Increased measurements of wind, waves, and soil helped the industry better understand tropical cyclones' effects on offshore platforms, but with each stronger storm, there was much to learn. Camille, a hurricane of "extraordinary intensity and rare meteorological violence" (Longshore 1998:51), ripped apart the region. Camille produced 70 to 75-foot waves as she passed through "Offshore Alley," south of New Orleans. This hurricane also brought new design challenges as one of the platforms was lost in an underwater mudslide. Sediment shifting, especially near the Mississippi Delta, proved to be another technological concern, and not merely during hurricane season, according to Ray Galvin, an engineer:

And you could have mud slides created with a lot of these little winter storms. You did not have to have a hurricane. It was just periodically, that stuff was going to move as more of that sediment was dumped down the river. The sediment that used to be dropped all across the Delta and all across South Louisiana was

channelized down the river and all dumped out there (UH-Houston History Project 2003).

As we can see, hurricanes, while being destructive, are also examples of natural experiments. In no other way would the industry be able to learn the details of hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico: they had to experience them. Larger, more powerful storms, such as Camille, were more destructive, providing singular opportunities from which to learn, as E.G. Ward, a long-time employee in the oil industry said:

As we progressed, we began to try to understand what happened in Hurricane Camille....That was quite a benchmark event, and I think it prompted the industry to take a critical look at finding out more about what happened during hurricanes, particularly the wind wave and current loads on platforms so that we could know how to better design them (UH-Houston History Project 1998)

These experiences, especially during the latter part of the 1960s, prompted technological advancements for the oil industry to stand more steadily against future hurricanes.

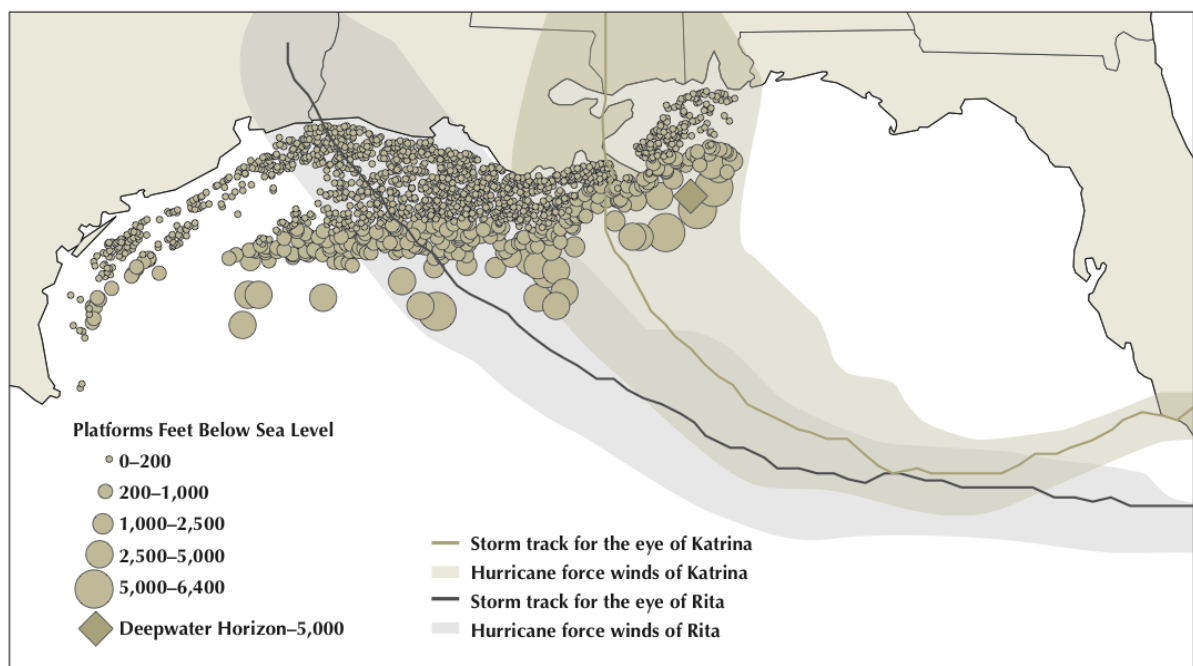
### Hurricane-Oil Industry Nexus

Any oil industry catastrophe during a hurricane is in fact the fault of both the industry and society, as “we construct our own disasters insofar as disasters occur in the environments that we produce” (Oliver-Smith 2002:43). The focus on design, resilience engineering, and worker risk for an industry situated necessarily where extraction takes place calls one to ponder how the territorially boundedness of oil affects the construction of risk of the hurricane-petroleum nexus.

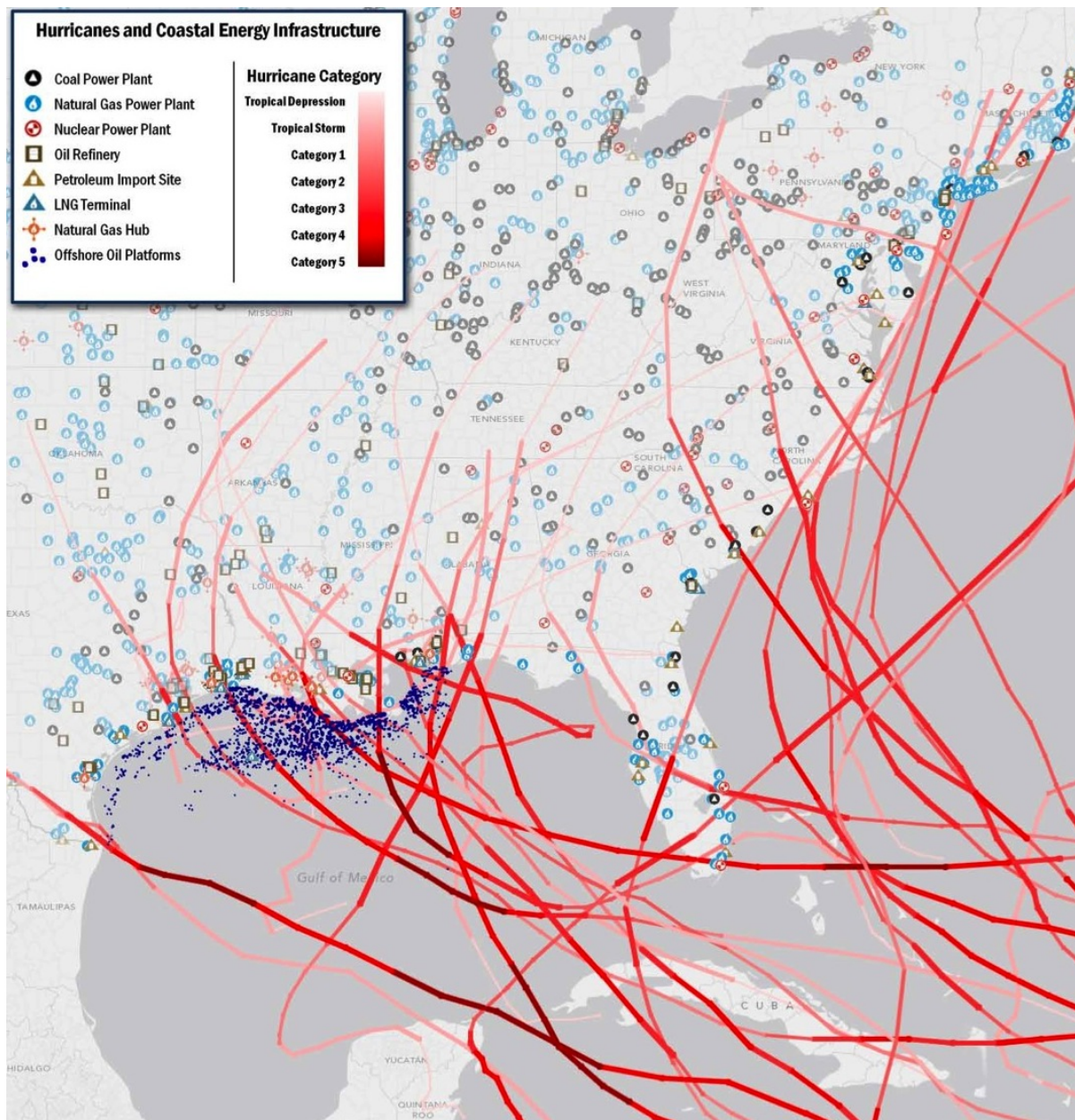
Hurricanes plow through the Gulf, following paths determined by temperature, pressure, and a wide range of other physical factors yet to be fully understood by scientists. Oil developers, motivated by prospects of profit, are quite interested in where they exploit the Gulf for oil. They necessarily search for where the oil is to extract it. Oil is territorially bound, as opposed to other

aspects of the industry, such as labor, financial capital, and intellectual capital and even—to a degree—infrastructure, which are mobile.

“Offshore Alley,” south of New Orleans, coincides with “Hurricane Alley,” the swath where a concentration of hurricanes occur, at about 86.5° to 90° west. Unlike people, Offshore Alley cannot “relocate” to less perilous locations, unless more easily exploited oilfields are located. The operations in Offshore Alley—a complex system of resources, infrastructure, and transportation networks—are necessarily located where the oil is (U.S. Department of Energy 2013:30). As long as humans want “cheap,” fossil fuel, they will necessarily depend on technological advances to develop, maintain, and survive in Hurricane Alley.



**Map 4: The Oil-Hurricane Nexus. Katrina's trajectory and offshore oil platforms.**  
Source: Needham et al. 2012.



**Map 5: The Oil-Hurricane Nexus. Hurricane trajectories and oil infrastructure.**

**Source: U.S. Department of Energy 2013**

## **Hurricanes and the Oil Industry**

Every other year an average of three tropical cyclones make landfall on United States coasts and a major hurricane (rating a Category 3 or higher on the Saffir-Simpson hurricane wind scale) reaches the northern Gulf of Mexico coast. As offshore oil exploration and extraction go farther

and farther offshore, however, hurricanes are more likely encounter the built environment before they make landfall. Each hurricane, passing through the ever-growing constellation of offshore oil rigs—each an investment of between \$150 million and \$1.15 billion (Kaiser and Snyder 2012) and crewed by dozens of workers—is a potential hazard in the Gulf of Mexico.

Offshore producers in the Gulf of Mexico are quite literally on the front line of hurricane hazards, and although platforms are currently designed to withstand 100-year storms, they can incur extensive damage and loss. High winds and waves can cause platforms to break free from their moorings and drift, such as a semi-submersible drilling rig that drifted 70 miles away from its mooring site after Hurricane Ivan in 2004 (Panchang and Li 2006:481). Other platforms simply have gone missing.

With the threat of a hurricane, offshore operators have two decisions to make: one involves stopping the flow of oil—to prevent spills; the other involves evacuating staff—to prevent loss of life. Companies make these decisions, calculating the economic value of the downtime disruptions. Personnel evacuations for the entire industry have cost \$500 million during the most severe hurricane seasons (Done et al. 2011). Yet this is a small cost compared to loss of production, repairs, and hardening and retrofitting existing structures. Design criteria to allow platforms to withstand a mere 10 percent increase in wave height may increase new construction cost by \$50 million per rig (*ibid.*). Retrofitting and hardening existing structures is costly, prompting many companies to hedge against potential future repair costs if hazards do become reality (Wilbanks et al. 2008).

## Labor Demand After Katrina and Rita

The workforce vacuum created when around 1.5 million people were evacuated or displaced, together with repair work, increased retrofitting of existing structures, and heightened regulations and requirements for new builds, prompted the oil and ancillary industries to look for workers in new ways following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In the aftermath of the 2005 hurricane season, the media focused on the “inadequacies of the relief effort, a rising death toll, and the more than one million persons displaced...including legal and illegal immigrants” (Donato et al. 2010:265). But quickly, concern shifted to reconstruction.

At a high point in the demand for oil and gas came the need to repair damaged rigs and platforms in the Gulf. Likewise, shipyards and fabrication facilities along the Gulf were busy with refurbishments and upgrades of the existing fleet. Following the hurricanes of 2005, the Minerals Management Service mandated new design specifications, effectively downgrading the water-depth capabilities ratings of many of the existing rigs and upgrading rig fitness requirements.

Even when flood waters subsided in southern Louisiana—the region that has historically been most tied to the oil and gas and fabrication industry—evacuees did not readily return. Although there was much work to be done, there were few housing options for workers. With the destruction of the physical infrastructure to house workers, employers along much of the Gulf of Mexico struggled to attract workers (Pettersen et al. 2006:656). “We like to say that the water wiped everyone away and we can’t find them anymore,” one interviewee in southern Louisiana quipped when discussing labor shortages (Interview, Amelia, La., June 10, 2008). Workers were simply no longer in the area, and of those who were, many followed higher paying jobs.



“Diego,” the first H-2B worker I met and interviewed in Texas, recognized the reason so many welders and pipefitters were brought to work along the Gulf of Mexico following the 2005 hurricanes: “it’s that many of the platforms have really suffered from the hurricanes and now they have to build them hurricane-proof” (Interview, Ingleside, Feb. 2, 2008). Nearly all company and industry officials and workers attributed the so-called spike in work to the hurricanes. A tragic situation, the hurricanes led to opportunities for work and income for many. The post-hurricane work affected a large tract of the Gulf of Mexico and lasted for several years. Although the area where I conducted fieldwork did not bear the physical brunt of the hurricanes, fabrication yards conducted repair work and work crews were located there, away from the destruction in southern Louisiana. A company supervisor told me, “We’ve pretty much doubled since Katrina. We had 30 crews out after Katrina hit. It’s the reason the office here actually opened, to get the manpower to get as many crews out as we could—to supplement the Louisiana crews. We had to turn work away because we just didn’t have enough people” (Interview, Ingleside, April 30, 2008). The industry was still backlogged in repair work, advertising for skilled craftsman, even three years after the disastrous hurricanes: “we had a big surge in repair. Even our business today is a direct effect of Katrina and it will be for a while” (Interview, Houma, La., July 20, 2008).

“But now after Katrina you can work as much as you want. The contracts are backed up for months,” a long-time blue-collar worker in the industry said, “Nobody who wants a job is without one. And we can’t get enough people to work” (Interview, Larose, La., July 28, 2007). I repeatedly heard this sentiment during my fieldwork in Texas: business is booming! We are begging for workers! People who can’t find work must be lazy and want to live off the

government. But it is problematic to assume anyone who wanted a job during this time would be able to find one in the booming oil and gas industry after the hurricanes of 2005.

Industry officials claimed the work surplus should mean that no one should be unemployed. Many also complained that young people are not filling the gap left in the skilled craft labor force as the baby-boom generation retires. An administrator at a craft training program claimed people are beginning to realize what the aging of the baby boomers means: “We already have a shortage with baby-boomers still working. So what’s it going to be when they leave?” (Interview, Corpus Christi, Tex., April 11, 2008). Generally, welders and fitters did not want their children to follow in their footsteps; many of them worked long hours in difficult, dangerous, and dirty situations so their children could obtain a four-year college degree and preferably work behind a desk.

Moreover, positions needed for repair and new-build work require skill. Welding and pipefitting, the two primary skills advertised and in demand, must be learned either through an apprenticeship—either in formal on-the-job training, vocational school, or informally with friends or family. Obtaining this type of work takes preparation, and employers attempt to control the quality of workers by testing their skills before hiring.

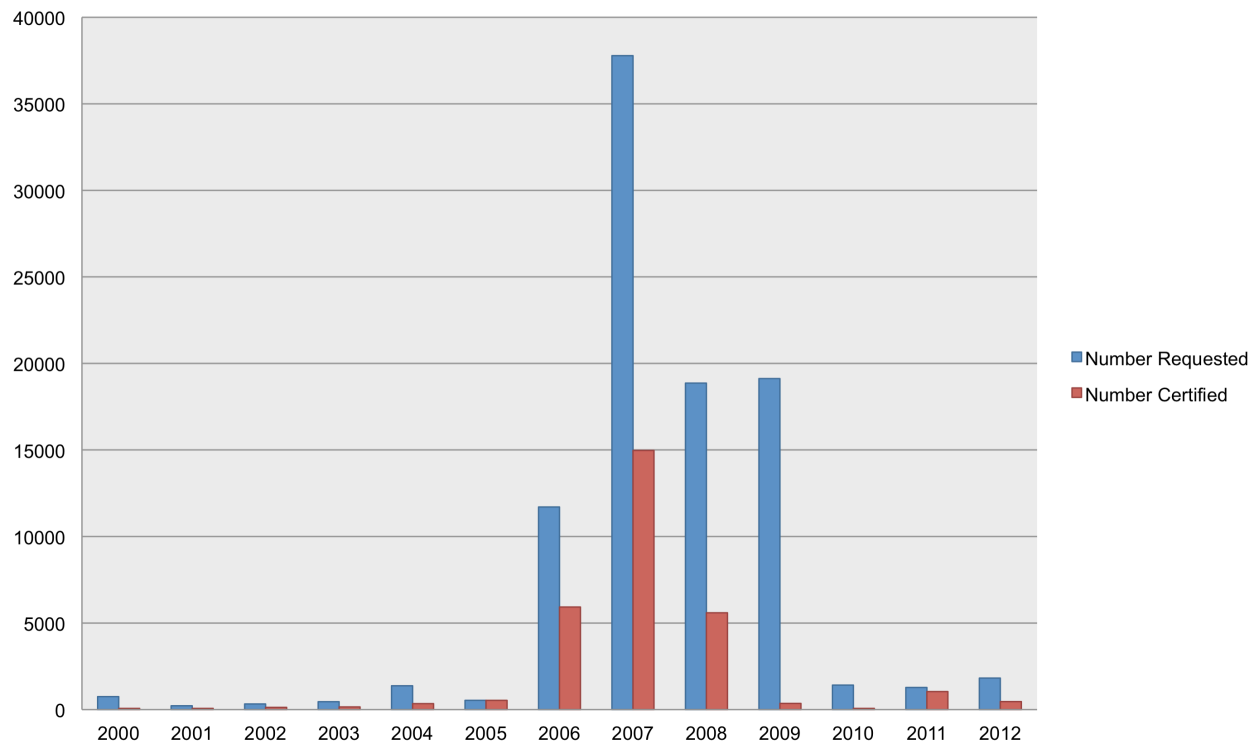
The extreme demand for labor following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita exacerbated competition for skilled, available workers. With this “demand surge” (Hallegatte 2008:6-7) and the inflated wages paid by certain companies, other companies struggled to keep employees. “Everyone is vying for the same labor talents and skills, and there just isn’t enough to go around” (Interview, Port Arthur, Tex., April 28, 2008).

Competition for a shrunken workforce provoked employers to pursue new ways to obtain an adequate workforce. They wanted skilled, available, hard workers, willing to work for advertised pay. Many drew on the increasing numbers of contractors (Austin 2014:118) who readily took advantage of the situation and who began recruiting in other parts of the US and the world. Some of these labor contractors and companies sought foreign workers, through authorized means and otherwise. For the first time, the industry as a whole entered the H-2B visa market. Nearly all employers named the 2005 hurricane season as the reason they began using H-2B visas. “The crunch started around Katrina,” one human resources director noted, “maybe because the workforce left or because there was so much work in offshore because of all the repair” (Interview, Lockport, La., June 24, 2008).

It should be noted, however, that although Hurricanes Katrina and Rita drove the process, the increase in solicitations for H-2B visas from fabrication and shipbuilding in the Gulf Coast also was influenced by legislation. Mere months before Katrina and Rita, Congress signed the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Tsunami Relief, effectively exempting returning H-2B workers from the H-2B cap of 66,000 per year. This permitted the H-2B program to expand into new work sectors, such as the fabrication and shipbuilding industry, without counting against the total cap used by a variety of industries (Austin 2014: 112).

Although a few companies pursued the H-2B guestworker program as a way to fill workforce needs before the 2005 hurricane season, widespread use of the program did not occur until after Katrina and Rita. One supervisor mentioned that although labor was tight before the storms, they did not even know what the H-2B visa was until after the 2005 storms. Some companies

regarded the H-2B program as a viable way to make up for the labor shortage, indeed, a significant part of the labor demand solution. In fact, some felt the H-2B program was more than a stopgap measure to fix labor issues: “after the hurricane we started using much more temporary and H-2B labor. The world has changed since the hurricane and I don’t think it is going to go back to the way it used to be” (Interview, Escatawpha, Miss., July 30, 2008).



**Figure 2: Department of Labor certifications for H-2B Visas in the Gulf Coast fabrication industry.**  
**Source: Foreign Labor Certification Data Center Online Wage Library, <http://www.flcdatcenter.com>.**

As shown in Figure 2 Few H-2B visas were requested until 2006, the year following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the changes in the returning H-2B worker counts. With pressure to get offshore platforms back in working condition, displaced workers, and competition for existing labor, requests and certifications for foreign workers increased dramatically in 2006 and 2007. Almost as suddenly, certifications, then requests declined in 2008 and 2009. The

Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Tsunami Relief ended in 2008; the total number of H-2B visas in all industries reverted to the previous cap of 66,000. Returning workers again counted against this cap.

Data from the Department of Labor provide a measure of demand rather than actual numbers of H-2B workers who enter the US. Obtaining reliable population and migrant data—even data on authorized migrants—is difficult. Donato (2010:275) claims that “no comprehensive source of data yet exists to measure the size and attributes of the immigrant population in the Gulf states. With little quantitative data to describe the population, immigrants remain largely invisible in formal estimates.” Complicating the difficulty of gathering population data on H-2B workers was the widespread use of the visa libre (see Chapter 4), as many workers once tied to a single company sought work elsewhere.

### Climate Change and Hurricanes

My fieldwork was directly affected by several hurricanes. Prior to my arrival to the field, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita induced devastation in the Gulf Coast. I learned how to board up windows and live without running water during Hurricane Dolly, in July 2008, which shut down South Texas for several days. Likewise, while I was conducting fieldwork in Mexico in August 2012, Ernesto threatened the Campeche coast. And just as I was completing my fieldwork at the end of October, 2012, Superstorm Sandy brewed along the upper Atlantic, merging with a strong winter storm, and prompting many to ask about the climate change effects on these storms. Although I did not start my research with the intent to study weather events or climate change, hurricanes underpinned nearly every interaction I had in the field. A Colorado farm girl with little experience with tropical storms, I was awed by these storms. They were tracked with

anticipation; their dreaded strength built and brewed for days. Hurricanes are an amalgamation of many weather features I had never experienced together: unimaginable wind, torrential rain, tornados, and flooding. Was I impressed because for the first time I was experiencing and learning about these tempests? Or is something making these storms stronger, more frequent, more destructive?

I was not alone in thinking we are living in different times. Many people, from journalists to climate scientists were asking the same question: is this climate change? (Emanuel 2007; Frank 2012; Karl et al. 2008) Mbembe (2000a) claims that by virtue of living in a time distinct from the past and how we imagine the past, we experience the present as extraordinary. But is the present climate we are living in, the destructive hurricanes like Katrina and Sandy that millions felt the brunt of, different because of climate change? Attribution is a thorny issue for scientists. Frank (2012) notes that for years scientists believed they could not link a single weather event with climate change, as climate change by definition is about trends over time. Recently, however, scientists are “attempting to quantify the role human-driven climate change plays in particular events” (ibid.). Some climate scientists today believe that certain weather events’ characteristics, for instance, the probabilities of occurrence or an event’s magnitude, can be attributed to human-driven climate change.

Especially in areas with a growing population and where the built environment tests new ground (or waters, as the case may be), understanding fluctuations in hurricane activity is important to society. Attempting to understand the changes in the genesis, growth, and trajectory of a hurricane is more complex than predicting temperature or precipitation changes, as hurricanes involve many more variables. Tropical cyclone activity has a high degree of natural

variability, which makes prediction even more difficult. Some scientists believe the effects of climate change on hurricanes should be disregarded because of this large natural variability, especially compared to expected changes owing to global warming. Emanuel (2004:405), however, believes this way of thinking is short sighted. “The longer one’s time horizon, the more consequential the effects of global warming.” In fact, many scientists believe we can expect a significant anthropogenic effect in Atlantic hurricanes (Bender et al. 2010).

Smokestacks and tailpipes. Converting the carbon in fossil fuels to energy—to light our homes, power our gadgets, and move us from place to place—has resulted in an increased concentration of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, in the atmosphere. Consequently, we have increased the temperature of the Earth—the surface, lower atmosphere, and oceans (Mooney 2007:8). Atlantic hurricanes form in the tropics near Africa, drawing energy from the tropical ocean waters, forming because of a thermodynamic disequilibrium between the tropic waters and the atmosphere (Emanuel 2004:405). Holland (2007:2713) finds that, given the strong relationship between Atlantic sea surface temperature (SST) and tropical cyclone variability, tropical cyclone frequency is due to greenhouse warming.

Theory and computer modeling show that an increase in SST will affect hurricanes under future climate scenarios, primarily due to increased global average temperatures (Emanuel 2005a; 2005b:686). Recent studies show hurricanes will likely increase in the future (Done et al. 2011). Although the evidence that hurricanes will be more intense in the future is quite strong, scientists are less confident the frequency of hurricanes will increase.

Increase in intensity is perhaps more hazardous than the threat of more hurricanes. Strong hurricanes cause dramatically more destruction than weak ones. Much like the measurement of

earthquake magnitude, hurricane magnitude is not a linear measure of wind speed. A Category 4 hurricane (with winds greater than 131 mph) causes an estimated 64 times as much destruction as a Category 1 storm (with winds 74-95 mph) (Mooney 2007). Since the 1970s, the intensity of hurricanes and tropical storms has increased, and according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2012), their intensity will likely increase. They may be fewer, but will likely be stronger (U.S. Department of Energy 2013).

Although scientists are hesitant to attribute a single extreme weather event—or even its severity—to climate change, it is widely agreed that the upward trend in hurricane intensity is due to anthropogenic climate change. Over the past 15 years hurricane activity in the Gulf of Mexico has been above the long-term average for the area, and Hurricanes Ivan and Katrina “appear to fall far above the historical hazard curve in the Gulf” (Done et al. 2011:1). If hurricanes follow this trend of increased destructive potential there will be widespread implications for the energy industry in the Gulf.

It would be prudent to view Katrina as a bellwether of things to come. Production disruptions, lengthy repairs, hardening requirements, and the concomitant labor demand experienced after the hurricane season of 2005 can be expected following such future storms. After Katrina, direct losses cost the energy industry an estimated \$15 billion, not counting the many millions in recovery and restoration (Wilbanks et al. 2008:38). As offshore oil exploration moves further into the Gulf of Mexico, into deeper waters and storm-prone areas, offshore facilities will need to be prepared to withstand hurricane risk as we increasingly understand it (Done et al. 2011:1; Wilbanks et al. 2008). The Gulf of Mexico offshore oil industry is adept at learning on the fly and uses mistakes and adversity as learning tools. But it also budgets failure



into its books and is venturing farther and farther into the deep unknown. Technology has proven adroit at making offshore petroleum extraction not only successful but also profitable, but what are the limits of technology? Preparing older vessels and infrastructure—as well as new builds—requires not only a hefty capital investment but skilled labor, workers that, the post-Katrina situation exposed, are not easy to locate. The labor crisis following Katrina, and how employers, foreign workers, and labor contractors responded to it, is indicative of the local and global impacts of a “natural” disaster.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

An ethnographic analysis of precarity as experienced by migrant Mexican oil workers in permanently insecure work regimes in the Gulf of Mexico, this study explores 1) precarious employment situations in the oil industry and 2) tactics workers use to navigate, cope with, and diminish uncertainty. In addition to workers' experiences, I analyze the contexts in which individuals live and work, including: labor-market changes; the history, politics, and geography of oil; and hurricanes' impacts on labor. To better understand the tightrope walk between precarious employment and unemployment, I conducted interviews with workers, industry officials, community members, and others in Texas and Campeche, focusing on work experiences in the oil industry. With workers, interviews emphasized domains of uncertainty, including mobility, loyalty and trust in institutions, experiences of getting hired, and effects of extreme weather.

In many industries, including the oil industry, there has been a distinct transition to casualized labor. In an attempt to retain high profits, employers keep a very lean permanent workforce and hire workers for a temporary period, only when absolutely needed. Consequently, with companies' efforts to become more agile on a global market, workers are expected to absorb additional costs, financial risks, and liability that were the responsibility of the company under Fordism. As a result, all the unemployed, contracted, and H-2B workers I interviewed held numerous contract jobs and had little faith in obtaining full-time, permanent employment.

An example of how some American companies in the oil and related industries have further placed profit over worker security is the use of the H-2B visa following the hurricanes of 2005. Rather than recruit American workers from unaffected areas of the US, many companies

solicited temporary nonimmigrant guestworker visas through the H-2B program. This strategy has been employed by greater numbers of industries to increase profits by speeding up production, reducing pay, increasing work hours, and fighting unionization—all made possible because of a heavy reliance on vulnerable migrants.

Workers in precarious conditions have come to think of layoffs as an always present danger and a normal part of the work experience, and, thus, they have entered into serial contract labor situations. Many workers have worked for years, even decades, as contract laborers, jumping from job to job as needed, resulting in a fragmentation of their work history. Employers or companies may contract a surplus of workers “just in case.” This has devastating results for workers. They may assume they have work when in reality their name is just on the books. They do not work and are not paid until the demand is sufficient. This results in much downtime for workers who often live off remnants of their last paycheck. Finally, workers, especially in Mexico, must cope with cronyism, bribes, and renting work, or engage in these activities themselves.

The uncertainty workers face is not merely material. Casualized work regimes fragment social bonds, making workers even more insecure. Workers and their loved ones experience precarity at a deeper level. With the loss of a narrative thread, contingent workers’ lives are fragmented. Relationships suffer. Likewise, identity is not tied to what one does for a living, as it can change at a moment’s notice. Additionally, when an individual must search in areas away from home to sustain himself and his family, civic identity dissolves. Conveniently for employers, workers with increasingly dissolved social bonds are ever more exploitable.

Unlike in circumstances where uncertainty can be lessened by gathering more information,

workers in precarious and uncertain situations must develop strategies and tactics to navigate their reality. These strategies must be contextual; coping is contingent. Workers attempt to deal with their uncertain situations in a variety of ways. Some live an illusion of certainty. Others develop a strategy of inaction.

More interestingly, however, is how workers develop tactics within the overarching structure of the labor system. Maneuvering within oppressive structures, workers devise various practices to cope during long unemployment intervals and while working in precarious situations. They act and react in the cracks created by "the state's indifference and capital's arbitrariness" (Spyridakis 2013:241).

Precarious workers improvise to get by. Many workers become involved in the informal economy during their break from offshore work or when they are looking for an offshore contract. Others forgo pay to get themselves in the door, so to speak, in the industry. Many workers I spoke with admitted to using their time "on the clock" to pursue other job opportunities or to make extra money. They use their mobility as a resilience and resistance tactic. When things become difficult at the worksite or with coworkers, they move.

A group of migrants I interviewed coopted the H-2B guestworker program for their own ends. Rather than remaining bound to their employer for the extent of their stay, they absconded with their legal documentation and pursued better jobs on their own. When an opportunity arose somewhere else, they moved.

Social networks are also invaluable to precarious workers. Strong ties, such as family and close friends, however, are less effective to counteract the effects of precarity than weak ties. Finally, workers from areas where livelihoods such as agriculture and fishing are practiced are

more resistant to precarity. In this case, workers are able to use the oil industry as a tactic to counteract the uncertainties of their livelihoods.

Hurricane Katrina may be a bellwether of things to come for labor and weather issues in the Gulf of Mexico. Although the media coverage of Katrina's aftermath focused little on labor shortages, the repair and rebuilding of the area left many industries, including oil and gas, in dire straits. With an exodus of workers and housing destroyed after Katrina, companies chose to import workers (ironically, who also needed housing) to speedily deal with an influx of work. Climatologists project future hurricanes will be more severe and have more destructive potential. With an increase in sea surface temperatures expected with global warming, strong hurricanes are expected to be more prevalent than in the past. The geographical coincidence of the Gulf of Mexico Hurricane Alley with Offshore Alley is unfortunate. We can expect rigs, ships, platforms, and pipelines to incur hurricane damage. Building stronger infrastructure and hardening existing vessels will require a labor force that the industry has struggled to adequately locate.

These Mexican migrant oil workers' experiences—their problems and coping mechanisms—are not entirely unique. A wide range of employers in many industries attempt to increase profits by creating and controlling a flexible workforce. Arrangements of inequality, casualized labor, and exploitation are widespread and growing, from the Mexican welders and maniobristas I interviewed to graphic designers or programmers in the computer industry to adjunct instructors in universities.

It has become customary to frame the flipside of the oil industry's remarkable profits as environmental degradation, wetland loss, oil spills. Here I present the otherwise neglected aspect

of the industry: its workers. I expose the unsavory work regime, where it is not only dangerous work conditions that make work in this industry risky. Employment security is virtually nonexistent, as project-based contract employment has become the norm. Rather than investing in training and maintaining a workforce that is loyal, safe, and adaptable, companies have chosen the path of high profits and little responsibility. Companies have chosen to turn greater profit quickly, divesting themselves of human capital. Discarding a stable workforce, they essentially throw out the knowledge and skills, talents and abilities, experience and trained judgment possessed by workers who have a history and vested interest in the future of their work within the company.

Companies' preference for just-in-time human resource strategies creates long-term problems. Keeping an agile and lean workforce is profitable in the short term, allowing companies to quickly adapt to waxing and waning labor demand. Without a bulky workforce to continue paying in lean times, companies lower their own risks, only to be borne by workers. Although companies are actively involved in locating the labor supply they need to maintain high profits, this only works in the short term. On the broader horizon, how will companies respond when greater numbers of baby boomers retire and fewer young people replace them in skilled craft positions?

How companies responded to the heightened labor demand after Katrina gives us an idea of how the industry will respond to future labor demand crises. Rather than raise wages and benefits to attract capable American workers, they sought a quick, cheap answer: guestworkers.

Neoliberal reforms have deteriorated the power of the state vis à vis corporations. Without state institutions to bolster them, individuals have been consigned to develop their own ways of

coping with growing uncertainties. In the face of uncertainty, workers do not feebly bow to uncertainty. Their actions to maneuver with the precarity that pervades many aspects of their lives are situated, diverse, negotiated, improvised, and corporeal.

Current discourse would have one believe that casualized labor and flexible employment are indispensable and inevitable in the global economy. That this is the way it is and must be. But flexible employment structures and neoliberal economics are not inevitable or natural; they are constructed arrangements at the service of certain individuals or interest groups. They are "ideologies recast as science" (Quinlan et al. 2001:517). In this context, postindustrial capitalism flourishes on disorganized, flexible, casual employment—and life in general—benefiting from insecurity, vulnerability, and hopelessness. But precarious employment, rather than being unavoidable, must be understood as "specific and *reversible* actions by key interest groups, most notably large (often multinational) capital and complicit organs of the economics profession, financial community, management consultants, and government" (ibid., emphasis mine).

Most people in the US, with a per capita GDP of \$52,800 (Central Intelligence Agency 2013), are ill-inclined to hear of the misfortunes of others. "If the woes are presented as both inevitable and irreversible, dictated by the laws of nature—the inevitability of the market as social regulator—rather than as the consequences of ongoing deployments of power, then quite understandably the average American citizen would rather not hear about them. She has her own uncertain future in mind" (Trouillot 2003:59). Moreover, citizens have come to believe that there is nothing to be done about the negative social consequences of globalization, what Linda Weiss (1997) refers to as "the political construction of hopelessness." While governments are in fact responding to pressures of the world economy, it is untrue that pressures are entirely from

globalization per se or that the only responses available are neoliberal in nature: flexibilization, casualization, privatization, and the dissolution of protections for individuals.

Likewise, the public is led to believe that it is an immutable and natural truth that there are jobs Americans will simply not do. It is troubling that this belief is often presented without considering the differing perspectives Americans and migrant workers have on wages and working conditions. Americans, moreover, assign tacit cultural attachments—attachments that are not static—to certain jobs. These attachments are not natural but created. Certain jobs did not naturally become "immigrant work," rather, the public came to view them this way as a result of a direct and concerted effort of employers to reduce wages, benefits, and protections (e.g., union protection and access to legal services). Keeping wages low, workplaces hazardous, and benefits meager ensures that only those in the most dire of circumstances—such as migrant workers fleeing unsustainable and perhaps dangerous homelands—are desperate enough to occupy certain jobs. As the meatpacking industry illustrates, once decent-paying, union-protected jobs can easily be turned into what the public considers "jobs Americans won't do." With weak to nonexistent union representation, difficult and dangerous work in the oil industry could certainly succumb to the same fate. As the years directly following Katrina show, the industry eagerly takes the opportunity to invest less in labor and to increase profits. If this means framing certain jobs as "immigrant work," many companies may choose to do so.

Casualized work affords the individual few opportunities to develop solidarity with fellow workers. Contingent workers in the oil industry on both sides of the Gulf of Mexico are left unprotected by unions. Along both the US and Mexican Gulf Coast, unions are viewed as having little value (see Austin et al. 2006). Workers I spoke with not only distrusted but also disdained



unions, and thus did not see them as offering a solution to employment problems. Without protections from unions, workers must roll with the punches as companies impose changes in a volatile industry. Workers' stories show that social bonds and solidarity in the workplace are weakened. Rather than combine forces against uncertainties and precarity, they resort to atomized solutions to problems of the moment.

It is time for sclerotic unions to respond to changes in how work regimes have evolved. Unions should become—as workers have before them—adaptable, flexible, and quick to respond to global changes in work. A traditional union changes as easily as an ocean liner attempting to make a sharp turn. Richard Sennett suggests refocusing the aims of unions, creating "parallel institutions" (Sennett 2006) that act as employment agencies but in addition to booking jobs also buy pensions and health care and help to create a sense of belonging and life narrative. This idea could be incorporated transnationally, offering protections for workers' rights while working at home or abroad, as in Jennifer Gordon's (2007) concept of transnational labor citizenship, which seeks to redefine relationships between sending countries and civil society.

Taking workers' tactics within precarious work structures as cues to how individuals are able to make do, policy makers may learn from them. In any situation, groups of individuals confront challenges and constraints. Some individuals utilize uncommon, even deviant, behaviors that permit them to succeed better than others. Using the concept of positive deviance (Lindberg 2010) and taking cues from this target groups of actors, decision makers could better inform policies. Although they are exploited and marginalized, contingent workers and migrants are actors within a created framework. Their actions can apprise policy makers of how individuals best address their own problems, deviating from the norm or, perhaps, not complying with rules

or breaking laws. Rather than seeing workers' tactics as mere ways of getting by at best or illicit activities at worst, their tactics can improve work policy. In this respect, the precariat can be considered, to use a term from positive deviance studies, "unlikely innovators" (Pascale et al. 2013).

For example, taking cues from migrants' actions themselves, the governments of, in this case, Mexico and the United States could work together to design a more effective program to deal with labor demand. The visa libre holders following the hurricanes of 2005 are an example of positive deviants. Although they did not follow the regulations of the H-2B visa program, many were successful. Workers with the visa libre:

1. Considered it important to enter the US safely with proper documentation and be able to return home (e.g., as required by familial responsibilities);
2. Were willing to pay an upfront cost for work flexibility;
3. Entered into arrangements with in-country recruiters, although they often disdained them and were treated inhumanely;
4. Prized their autonomy; and
5. Considered themselves skilled labor rather than mere migrant bodies.

A worker program styled on the visa libre workers' experiences would take these actions and preferences into account. Rather than relying on what is effectively a privatized visa program (Durand 2006), development of a program that has bilateral oversight could diminish the problems related to recruiters and "middle men" by conducting recruiting and contracting through consulates or consulate satellite offices in more remote areas. Workers could pay a yearly fee for membership in an organization that functions much like a transnational union. This

organization would offer placement services both at home and abroad, legal protections and guidance, health and accident insurance, and access to pension plans. Additionally, it could act as a digital repository for individual's work histories—vetting their experience, training, and skills—to be used as needed by workers when pursuing new work and employers when seeking to fill positions.

Visa libre holders were often willing to pay over \$2,000 for a visa that offered the mere prospect of work and no protections. Workers should be willing to pay for a membership in a transnational union overseen by reputable agents and offering a work visa, protections, and benefits. Workers may not want to be bound to one employer, a critical drawback of the current H-2B program. The proposed program would break the current link between worker and employer and allow workers to choose where they work and leave a job if it proves unprofitable, unjust, or unsafe. Workers should also be able to obtain drivers licenses and make their housing arrangements as they choose, allowing a greater amount of autonomy. Moreover, the government oversight of these workers should be, first and foremost, the charge of the Department of Labor rather than Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, and it should ensure workers' rights are upheld.

There are a variety of ways this program would benefit not only workers, but companies as well. As it exists presently, the H-2B program is imperfect and often dysfunctional. Some companies complained that H-2B workers arrived without the skills necessary to do the jobs they were hired to do. This prompts some employers to let those employees go, which involves confirming that the worker does not remain in the US. Other companies decide to invest the time and money to train the workers, even though it was understood they were to arrive with adequate

training and skills. This raises company costs in unproductive down time and investment in educators and training locations. Incorporating a digital work information repository would ensure that only workers with the adequate skills and experiences are hired. Likewise, eliminating middlemen recruiters will safeguard against fraudulent claims about workers' experience and expertise. This digital repository, moreover, would streamline the currently cumbersome process.

Large companies, such as transnational oil corporations or fabrication companies, attempt to have a positive public perception. They curate their company image in company advertisements and press materials and how they present their business in project bids. Corporate citizenship, meeting ethical, legal, economic, and socially conscientious responsibilities, is increasingly demanded by shareholders and communities where companies are located. In addition to good environmental practices, training programs, excellent safety records, and donations to aid organizations, their involvement in a program that prioritizes workers' rights would be beneficial in creating strong corporate citizenship.

Flexible employment does not have to equal precarious employment. It is time that policy makers take workers into account. And rather than proposing legislation uninformed by research, they should enthusiastically pursue research that treats individuals' experiences, like Alonso's, as if they genuinely mattered. Alonso has lost thousands of dollars to silver-tongued recruiters, money that would have been better invested if there had been an organization that offered him work and protections with membership. Rather than being treated as a rented, compliant body, he could safely (and with authorization) choose his employer when working in Mexico or abroad. If

policies were written and enacted taking Alonso and others like him into account, fewer of their tactics to navigate uncertainty would involve illicit and risky behaviors.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The most destructive hurricane of the 2005 season, Hurricane Katrina, hit the Louisiana-Mississippi border on August 29, 2005. Less than a month later, Hurricane Rita made landfall at Sabine Pass, Texas, on September 24, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> In North America, the most widely used term is “contingent,” whereas in Europe, contingency is merely an aspect of the broader issue of precarious work.

<sup>3</sup> In this research fabrication and shipyards refer singularly to yards where primarily offshore oil rigs, platforms, and other oil-related vessels are built and repaired.

<sup>4</sup> Crude oil is now increasingly produced from oil sands, as in Alberta, Canada.

<sup>5</sup> Current Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto has aggressively pushed *reforma energética* (energy reform), which will reformulate how the petroleum industry functions, especially in respect to the involvement of foreign companies.

<sup>6</sup> *Expropiación Petrolera* (Petroleum Expropriation) is a Mexican national holiday; banks, schools, and government offices are closed on March 18th.

<sup>7</sup> The super majors are the world’s largest publicly owned oil companies: BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch Shell, Total, and ConocoPhillips.

<sup>8</sup> Named after Wildcat Hollow, near Titusville, Penn., where one of the first commercially productive oil wells was drilled, a wildcat well is an exploratory well, drilled in an area not previously known to be an oil field.

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